

"What are you?"

"I am a freak," the boy's quiet voice held no emotion as he stated the words. He kept any pain he felt locked up tight where it couldn't be used against him. He knew his catechism and by now couldn't even remember a time when he had fought it.

"Who was your father?"

"James Potter. Bully. Alcoholic. Wizard. Freak."

"What did he think of you?"

"I was a disappointment and an inconvenience."

"Who was your mother?"

"Lilly Potter. Spoiled brat. Whore. Witch. Freak."

"What did she think of you?"

"I was a disappointment and an inconvenience."

"How did they die?"

"In a car accident. They were drunk and at fault. An innocent was killed."

"How did you get your scar?"

"My father was drunk and angry. He hit me with a whiskey bottle and it broke and cut my forehead. They didn't have a doctor see to it, so it scarred."

"Why are you here?"

"When my parents died you kindly took me in."

"How do we treat you?"

"Far better than I deserve. You give me clothing, shelter, food, and discipline." He felt his stomach gurgle at the thought of food and prayed it would keep its unwelcome comments silent. He could wait.

"Do we give you too much discipline?"

"No. I am bad and you are trying to make me better. You only punish me when I'm bad, but I'm bad a lot. But it's my own fault and I am grateful that you care enough to try. It is a further sign of how bad I am that I do not change."

"Do we love you?"

"You love me even though I'm bad. Even though nobody else could. Even though my parents didn't. Even though I don't deserve it. You only punish me because you want to help me. Because you love me."

There. Done. The catechism he'd given every day since he was old enough to say the words. Before that they'd said it to him. With it complete, he prayed they would let him eat a bit, though he knew it was bad to even want to, since he didn't deserve it. His eyes widened slightly as his stomach growled loudly.

The faces before him stiffened and he stilled a cringe before he consciously realized it was trying to escape.

"Are you hungry, Harry?"

"Yes, Uncle Vernon," he whispered, ashamed of himself.

"What have we said of hunger?" his aunt chimed in, glaring down at him.

"When you are bad, you don't deserve to eat. To get hungry anyway is defiance."

"Are you good, Harry?" she asked him, voice steely.

"No, Aunt Petunia."

"Then I must assume that you are defiant?" his uncle asked sadly.

"Yes, sir," he admitted, shivering slightly, trying to ignore the ache in his belly that was beginning to merge on nausea, hoping that his uncle would just beat him and not lock him up instead. The thought of the dark loneliness of the cupboard where an hour became a year and a day a lifetime... His stomach rumbled again, more loudly, and a shiver ran through his slight frame, the only sign of fear he was permitted. The only sign they couldn't see. His eyes moved frantically to his uncle's face. "I'm sorry, Uncle Vernon," he whispered.

"But still defiant. I had thought you were improving, Harry," he said sadly, shaking his head.

"I'm trying, Uncle Vernon. I fought it for six days this time."

"You fought it," the man repeated softly. "Meaning you've been hungry the whole time?"

Reluctantly he admitted, "Yes, sir. But I've tried not to be."

His uncle sighed. "Sometimes I despair of you, Harry. Eat something and go to your cupboard. It will be special discipline tonight, I'm afraid."

"I- I needn't eat, Uncle Vernon," he suggested, refusing to think about the promised special punishment. It was only for when he was especially bad.

"Eat, boy. When it reaches this point you would do something even worse if you don't eat."

"Yes, Uncle Vernon," he whispered, and went dejectedly to the kitchen. Opening the icebox he glanced through the contents before his eyes landed on a loaf of bread. He took out the first two slices from it and put the rest of the package carefully away. He didn't even glance at the other foods. He was allowed to eat it, of course, but he was bad and it showed. Eating it made him really sick. It tasted amazing, but he couldn't keep it down. Nothing but bread and sometimes lettuce or other vegetables.

He ate his bread quietly, cleaned up the couple crumbs he had spilled, and returned to the living room. Taking a deep breath, he opened the

door of his cupboard, entered, and closed it behind him. In the safety of the dark, he flinched as he heard the bolt pulled.

And then nothing. No light. No sound. And he was alone and time seemed to stop passing altogether. It seemed an eternity before his uncle came. The light from the living room was dim as the man looked down at the boy in the cupboard. "You know what to do, Harry."

"Yes, Uncle Vernon," he acknowledged, as the door closed, leaving the two of them sealed in the dark. He stripped off his clothes and waited.

"If I didn't want to help you I wouldn't be able to bring myself to touch you." The words were the same every time he received special discipline. Spoken in that sad tone of voice that made him wish he were dead rather than being a burden on his family.

"I know, Uncle Vernon. I apologize for forcing this upon you again," he whispered, lying down, face down on his nest of blankets and rags. He spread his thighs as he heard his uncle spit several times. Then was the familiar pressure followed up by ripping pain that increased as his uncle grunted and began thrusting. Harry clenched his eyes and teeth and waited for his punishment to end. Which it did with a surge of fluid entering him, a few last thrusts, and his uncle standing up.

"Harry?"

"I'm sorry you had to touch me, Uncle Vernon. I will try to be better in the future."

"See that you do."

Then he was gone and Harry pulled on some clothes by feel, curled up in his nest, and shuddered. He knew he should be grateful for the special discipline. Knew how much his uncle hated touching him, and that the man was degraded by the contact. Even when he beat him, he hit him in the chest or back, where he would not have to touch skin to skin. Or used a belt or stick. Or both. Harry knew his uncle did this only because he loved him and wanted to help him try to be good.

But he hated it, even though he knew it was ungrateful, defiant. Eventually, he fell asleep.

When he woke, he found the cupboard unlocked and stumbled out to find that it was still early. Without hesitation, he moved to the kitchen and began cooking breakfast for the family. French toast and bacon. He loved the smell of bacon. He'd taken a strip for himself once, a long time ago, and knew it tasted as good as it smelled. Then it made him violently ill. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia had been so disappointed in him. He'd never repeated the experiment.

Breakfast passed quietly enough, and Harry started cleaning up while the others settled into the living room to watch Saturday morning TV. When he was done with the dishes he went upstairs, made their beds, and cleaned their rooms up there, gathering laundry to take back down with him. Dudley, emerging from the kitchen with a snack as he was going by, reached out negligently with one arm and shoved him to the wall. The adults turned to glare at the smaller boy.

"Harry, don't anger Dudley," his aunt said tiredly. "Sometimes I'm close to losing all hope in you."

Green eyes fell, and Harry swallowed. "I'm sorry, Aunt Petunia."

"Am I really the one who needs an apology?"

The thin boy nodded, and turned to his obese cousin. "I'm sorry, Dudley."

"you said that last time," his cousin pointed out.

"I know," he admitted. "I'm just not sure what I did or how to stop."

"You *should* know, shouldn't he, Mummy?" he demanded of his mother. "It's bad not to know."

"That's right, Duddykins," Petunia approved.

Dudley nodded, set his snack down on the coffee table, knocked the laundry out of Harry's arms, and punched him four times in the

stomach as hard as he could, leaving Harry huddled on the floor, fighting to keep from throwing up. "Figure it out," he ordered.

"I'll try. Thank you, Dudley," he whispered.

The larger boy kicked him hard in the ribs, adding, "And you shouldn't drop our clothes."

"I'm sorry," he whispered, gathering up the dirty laundry, stumbling to his feet, and continuing through the kitchen to the stairs and down to the laundry room. He put in a load of laundry, and glanced around. The light was a bit dim since there was a thick layer of grime on the small high windows. He stared at it for a long moment, hating it, wanting desperately to clean it, but it was no good. He couldn't go outside and he couldn't clean the outside of the windows from in here. And this side was sparkling clean, as was everything else down here. Finding nothing to do, he returned upstairs, searching for some unfinished task. After a few quick moves in the kitchen, everything was spotless.

"Dudley," Uncle Vernon was saying as he moved back into the living room, "go mow the lawn."

"Why can't Harry do it?" his cousin demanded, and Harry froze, half hoping and half fearing that his uncle would finally give in.

"Because Harry isn't allowed out of the house. Someone could see him."

Reluctantly, Dudley hefted his weight up and dragged himself outside. Vernon turned to glare at Harry. "Nothing to do?"

"No, sir. Not until it's time to move the laundry."

"Well, then? Into your cupboard with you."

The boy shivered, but entered obediently, pulling the door shut behind him. He'd never been out of the house, that he could remember. His aunt homeschooled him, though he wasn't sure all his lessons were the same that other children had. There was nobody to ask, after all. He never spoke to anyone but the family. If anyone else

was coming, he was locked in his cupboard. Once, when Uncle Vernon's sister came to visit, he'd been locked in for four days with nothing but a gallon of water and a bucket for filth. He'd begun to wonder if they'd ever let him out. It was a long time before the smell left, for all that he had, of course, used the bucket. The bucket was always there, whether guests were expected or not, just in case he got locked in and wasn't able to hold it long enough, for any reason. Using it was, nonetheless, frowned upon. If he did, even if it was due to being locked in for four days, the bucket was left in his cupboard for a week before he was allowed to clean it out, as punishment.

The door opened and he squinted up at Uncle Vernon. "Come out, Harry."

Quickly obedient, he rolled to his feet and stepped out, into the living room, suppressing a wince as the new bruises on his stomach and sides complained. His uncle was holding an envelope which he handed to Harry. Who stared at him in shock. "Uncle Vernon?"

"Read it."

Frightened by the unusual situation, he obeyed. It was addressed

<i>Mr.</i>		<i>H</i>		<i>Potter</i>
<i>The</i>	<i>Cupboard</i>	<i>under</i>	<i>the</i>	<i>Stairs</i>
<i>4</i>		<i>Privet</i>		<i>Drive</i>
<i>Little</i>				<i>Whinging</i>
<i>Surrey</i>				

Fingers trembling, he opened the envelope, slipped out the thick sheet of paper within, and opened it. It was handwritten in green lettering and said,

HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc., Chf. Warlock,
Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. Of Wizards)

Dear Mr. Potter,

Although it is not our general policy to contact young witches and wizards prior to their eleventh year, you are something of an exception. We have felt the wards protecting you and your family tested several times, of late, and fear that you may be in danger. We have therefore decided to, at least temporarily, take you into custody early, although it is a year and some few months early. For the time being you will stay at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry while we consider a more permanent solution. Please be advised that one of our faculty will be by Tuesday evening to collect you. Please be packed and ready to go at 6:15 pm. I apologize for the short notice and look forward to renewing our acquaintance.

*Yours
Albus Dumbledore*

sincerely,

Harry felt the blood drain from his face and he collapsed to his knees as his legs lost their ability to support him. "No," he whispered.

"I'm sorry, Harry. We knew something like this would happen soemtime and have tried to prepare you. You know we can't protect you from it."

"I know, Uncle Vernon."

"So. What do you do?" demanded his aunt.

"They will try to seduce me to magic and I must resist."

"Why?"

"Because magic is an unnatural, evil force used to twist and spoil all that is real and good."

"Good. Go on."

"I must try not to anger them because they are powerful. So I can't just refuse. Instead I must pretend to be very stupid and clumsy."

"Yes, what else? What will they do?"

"They will tell me lies about my parents and say they were good and noble. Say that magic is itself natural and can be used for good. They will give me magical things and try to buy my loyalty. Try to make me eat foods that I do not deserve and that will make me sick. They will try to make me hate you and will try to trick me into thinking that you have mistreated me."

Uncle Vernon smiled fondly down at him and nodded. "That's right, Harry. So you must be very cautious around them. Try not to defy them outright, but refuse to learn from them. If they cannot use you, eventually they will send you back."

"And if I see an opportunity to escape, I must take it and run. I must take care of myself until I am certain they have stopped following me, then I may come home."

"Very good, Harry," the voice was a caress and Harry's back straightened a little where he sat, still kneeling on the floor. It was how he sat for his lessons, and this was almost like a lesson. Besides, they didn't tell him to get up. "They will treat you as though there were nothing wrong with you, Harry. As though you were not bad. You know better, and so do they, but they will pet you and compliment you until you believe it."

"I will never believe that, Uncle Vernon," he said quickly.

"Now, now. Perhaps one day. Resisting their seduction will put you well on your path, Harry. It will purge much of the evil from you."

"Truly, Uncle Vernon?" he asked, brightening.

"Yes, my boy. There is hope for you yet, but only if you can resist the lure to become one of them."

"I *shall* resist it, sir."

"As you resist hunger?" he asked, shaking his head sadly. "I am worried for you, Harry."

The boy flushed, ashamed, and his uncle softened. "You will try. Do your best, Harry. It is rarely enough, but perhaps this time it will be. I

am worried for you. Without us to try to help you, I feel your evil will destroy the rest of you. But you *must* fight it. Give them nothing, Harry."

"I *will* Uncle Vernon. I promise."

"Good boy. As I say, there is hope yet. You must tell them nothing about your life here. Anything you say they will try to twist into new meanings. And you must not speak of your parents. They will only tell you lies about them. And don't forget your catechism, Harry. But let nobody hear it. It, too, would become merely a weapon. You must not let that happen."

"No, Uncle Vernon. It is my link to truth. The facts upon which everything I know is based. I won't let them undermine it and I'll never forget!"

"Good. Very good. Have a slice of bread, Harry. And see to the laundry."

"I- I'm not hungry, Uncle Vernon," he whispered, believing it to be true. The gnawing of his stomach was as negligible as ever he could remember it being.

"Good lad," Aunt Petunia's voice caressed him this time. "Go see to the laundry then."

"Yes, ma'am. Thank you, Aunt Petunia. Thank you, Uncle Vernon," he acknowledged, warmed by their approval. He went downstairs to transfer the laundry to the drier and put the next load in the wash. He wished something had already been through the drier to give him another few more minutes work before returning to his cupboard. He loved all of his chores, just as he loved the lessons his aunt and uncle gave him, mostly on the evils of magic. Because when he was working or learning he was not in the cupboard. Reluctantly, when he could find nothing else to do, he went back upstairs and vanished back under the stairs, closing the door behind him.

Dinner was early Tuesday evening so they would be finished before their unwelcome guest arrived. Harry was given a slice of bread though he insisted his hunger was presently quite manageable, and ate it almost fearfully, feeling like he was giving in to something horrible. He ate it kneeling in the far corner of the kitchen, ready to jump to obey if any of the family needed anything from him. Usually, except for their demands and unless he did something requiring of reprimand, he was ignored, but tonight was different. His aunt and uncle gave lots of last minute advice, which mainly consisted of playing dumb and giving away as little information about his life, his family, and his thoughts as he could. They warned him of what might be said to him and what kind of responses he should make. And they reassured him that if he could resist the magic and keep trying to be good even when surrounded by freaks, he would be making excellent progress towards actually *being* good.

Dudley pouted at not being the center of attention but was, for once, not heeded by his parents.

Harry listened carefully to all their instructions and advice. He was determined not to disappoint them. Although even now he knew he was doing badly and was angry at himself for the hint of pleasure he felt in having them show interest in him rather than Dudley. He knew it wasn't right, but it felt good to have them reminding him one more time before he left how much they really cared for him, how concerned they were for his safety and well being. And he had to admit, although he knew how much it would disappoint them if he said it aloud, that he was self-centered and shameless enough that having them tell Dudley not to interrupt made it all the better.

With the meal complete, Harry cleaned the kitchen for the last time before moving towards his cupboard. A word from his Uncle stopped him. "He'll be here in a quarter hour. You can stay out."

"Yes, Uncle Vernon," he acknowledged, surprised, stopping to stand awkwardly by his door. He was only out when he was doing something, whether cleaning or learning, and wasn't sure what to do.

Standing still was apparently permissible; however, his uncle didn't object. He was wearing clothes which, though far from top of the line, actually fit, and it felt ... odd. Confining, yet comfortable. And he had a small suitcase of similar clothes. Jeans, t-shirts, and sweatshirts more or less his size and purchased this morning in a thrift shop by Aunt Petunia. She had never been to one before, and Harry was grateful for and awed by her willingness go to such lengths for him. The items that were too far off in size she had tucked back into a bag to drop in the donation box the next time she drove by. They didn't want awkward questions asked about Harry's wardrobe.

Dudley and Petunia having retreated upstairs, Harry stood still and silent, his uncle at his side, until the doorbell rang. That sent him diving for his cupboard, but his uncle caught him with one hand on his shoulder and he froze in place awaiting punishment. "No need to hide. It's for you this time, after all. Grab your suitcase, then."

Always obedient, he picked up his suitcase with his left hand and let his uncle steer him to the door, standing nervously as the big man opened it, revealing the tall figure without.

The man was taller than Uncle Vernon but built more like Aunt Petunia, very thin, although his neck was shorter. He had lank shoulder length black hair, sallowness, and black eyes which were presently staring at Harry down a large hooked nose. "Potter, I presume?"

"Yes, sir," he whispered, the first words he could remember ever speaking to anyone not of the household.

"I am Professor Snape, the potions master at Hogwarts. Is that all you need?" he demanded, his voice seeming to imply simultaneously that he doubted Harry could survive with so little and that the small suitcase was already a major inconvenience.

"Yes, sir."

"Very well, then. Come along." The man nodded sharply to Mr. Dursely, then turned and walked back down the walk towards the street.

Harry followed, taking his first steps out of the house and his eyes widened as he took in the shining white of the fence, the green of the grass, the colorful garden, and the darker green of trees. His eyes traveled up a tall tree so dark it was nearly black and he froze, staring up at the vast emptiness above him. He felt a sudden irrational urge to grab on to something, to anchor himself before he fell into it. Slowly he sank to his knees, hands clutching desperately at the ground. The concrete sidewalk was hard beneath his knees, and his desperate fingers found nothing to hold onto, scrabbling uselessly against the walk.

"Mr. Potter!" The words didn't register but suddenly he was being lifted bodily from the ground by two long slim hands. "What is the meaning of this?"

"So- big-" he managed to force out between teeth clenched with fear.

"*What* is big? Do you see some dragon that I have somehow missed?" He scanned the skies, and then returned his glare to the boy trembling in his hands. "There is nothing there. If this is your idea of humor, Mr. Potter-"

The front door banged back open and Mr. Dursley hissed, "Will you please *go*? People will start to notice!"

"What's wrong with the boy?" the professor demanded. "There's nothing there!"

"That might be the problem. I daresay the sky feels a mite uncomfortable to him."

"How can the *sky* feel uncomfortable? And if he does have this senseless reaction to it, how could you have been unaware of that situation?"

"Never been under it, has he?" Dursley replied calmly. "We were told every place but our home was dangerous for the lad. Weren't given any way to get clarification. So we figured better safe than sorry, and kept him inside."

Snape's jaw dropped. "He has *never* been outside?"

"Not since he came to us, anyway."

"In nearly nine *years*?"

"That's right. Would you *please* remove yourself and the boy from our yard? What *will* the neighbors think?" The door slammed.

Fuming, Snape considered reopening it and cursing the entire family within, but finally turned to the trembling child beside him. "Mr. Potter." No response. "Harry," he tried in a voice of loathing, clearly not wanting to state the name.

"Yes, sir," the whisper was weak but it came instantly in response. "Sorry, sir."

"Can you control yourself enough to follow me?"

"I--" he swallowed heavily then dragged his eyes down from the huge emptiness above to the professor's face, though they still jerked furtively up from time to time and his shoulders were drawn protectively forward. "Yes, sir."

"Good." Again he turned and moved away, and this time the child followed, dividing his fearful gaze between wizard and sky, with only a bit of attention to spare the wonders he'd never seen before except through glances sneaked out of windows or at the television.

A shape passed by, loud and close, and he jerked a half meter to the side, almost falling down in his surprise, before realizing that it must be car. He recovered his balance as Professor Snape shot him a glare. "Sorry, sir," he whispered. Only to stop and close his eyes, face white, as a strong gust of wind ruffled his hair, pulling at his clothes.

"Oh for Merlin's-" The professor returned to the boy and growled, "Take my hand."

Bright green eyes snapped open in abject shock, and the boy stared at the offered left hand. Ungloved. He took a deep breath. He wasn't touched skin to skin unless he had been truly bad. But avoiding punishment deserved worse punishment. Reluctantly, he reached out and awkwardly took hold of the hand, the sky momentarily forgotten

in this new overwhelming terror. He wasn't supposed to touch. He'd touched Uncle Vernon's hand once, by mistake. In return he had received the worst beating he'd ever had, special punishments for a full week, and only water, no food, for that same week.

"Sorry, sir," he muttered, apologizing for soiling the professor with his touch, even if he had been instructed to do so.

The man's other hand pulled out what he recognized from his aunt's descriptions as a wand, and Harry watched in dread fascination as it waved about. He barely heard as words he didn't understand were spoken in a strange cadence. Then the professor started walking and he moved to follow only to find himself held in place by the grip on his hand. As he watched, the professor moved away holding the hand of a small pale child with messy black hair holding a battered suitcase. He began to tremble uncontrollably.

"Pull yourself together, Potter," a voice snapped at his side, and he jerked around to look at ... nothing. "We are invisible. I sent an illusion of us on to foil any watching eyes, but we need to get out of here too quickly for me to take you someplace private to apparate." It was said in the same tone Uncle Vernon used when he had failed a particularly simple lesson.

"Sorry, sir," he repeated, trembling, waiting for his punishment. The hand tightened slightly on his and he realized with a shock that the professor could feel his trembling. He wasn't allowed to fear punishment-- he deserved it, so what right had he to fear? As long as he kept his voice and expression steady and never actually flinched, his Uncle wouldn't realize, but with this touching-- it was a more dangerous situation than he had realized. He forced himself to stillness. "Sorry, sir."

"Would you stop apologizing every other second?" the cool voice snapped.

He froze, trying to comprehend the instruction.

"Just keep holding on. You'll feel a bit of a tug, then we'll be at the nearest apparition point to Hogwarts. Understood?"

Having no idea what he was being told, he quietly murmured, "No, sir. Sor-" he cut himself off.

A groan. "Well, you'll see. Just hold on. You *can* do at least *that*, I hope?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good."

Suddenly there was a wrenching jerk, and he clenched his eyes, fighting nausea. The ground seemed to move beneath him and he stumbled to his knees, startled to find beneath them something far softer than the sidewalk they had left behind. He opened his eyes in surprise and found himself staring down not at his knees as he'd expected, but, rather, at grass. The part where his knees ought to be was crushed down, but just to the side the grass stood taller, waving slightly in the light breeze. He leaned down to get a closer look, amazed by the tiny delicacy of the blades, the variety of colors, the intricacy of each blade of grass. He reached out with his free hand and gasped as he couldn't see it. But he felt the grass beneath it, cool and somehow fresh. The blades leapt out of the way as he moved the hand he couldn't see through them, and his eyes widened at the sensation of the grass running across his palm, tickling his fingers.

He heard a swish and a few murmured syllables and found himself staring at his hand, knees, visible once more, beside it. He began to shudder in reaction to the obvious magic. An ungentle tug on his other hand brought him scrambling to his feet with a murmured apology, which was answered by a growl. He looked up to see, if not actually meet, the irritated black gaze. "Come on, then. We'll be inside soon."

"Yes, sir," he replied mechanically, following as he was led onto a wide strip of brown that was harder and more solid than the grass but was more gritty beneath his feet than the floor at home ever was. There was short grass to either side of the road and then, after about ten feet of lawn, the dark looming shapes of trees. His gaze was forward and slightly lowered, as he usually held it, but focused on the air just ahead of him, trying to avoid seeing the sky, the trees, the wizard, everything. They left the forest and his breath quickened as

the omnipresent sky seemed even more overwhelming without the partial cover. Indeed, to one side of the road it seemed almost to fill the ground, as well, but after a moment he realized that the color was different and, from the sound realized that it was water. A lake. He was glad the professor was walking between him and it, and upset that he was able to think of a wizard's presence as anything but a menace to be hated and feared. They skirted the lake and he was finally forced to look up as a looming presence blocked out the low sun. He swallowed as he tried to comprehend the sheer size of the gray structure before them. There was only one thing it could possibly be-- Hogwarts. The focus of so many of his lessons over the years. The evil school where minds were twisted and freakish powers developed. This was where people became unnatural freaks-- as he would, if he wasn't cautious and determined.

The hand again tightened on his, and he realized that he was shuddering again. Frantically, he tamped down the shaking.

"Come on, boy. You can admire the school some other time," the professor's voice remarked sardonically.

Before hearing the words he hadn't noticed that he had stopped. "Sorry, sir." He started walking again, dread of their destination overcoming dread of the great emptiness above and the man beside. But disobedience was never an option.

They crossed an open lawn, and then entered the castle. Harry tried to suppress a traitorous relief at being under a roof again, even *this* roof, as long as it protected him from the great void of the sky. He took a shuddering breath, then released it, feeling a bit of tension ease from him, and managed to stop trembling. It wasn't fair how safe he felt here, how protected, when he *knew* how much danger he was in.

Once inside the school, Professor Snape dropped Harry's hand with an obvious relief that Harry found comforting in its normalcy. The boy's eyes widened as he took in his surroundings. Gray stone walls, darker in some places than others. Occasional open doors revealing black voids beyond, or, in other cases, rooms lit with warm light that seemed to move and flicker as they walked by. There were metal figures he eventually realized must be suits of armor standing at random intervals along the hallway, still and silent. Paintings seemed to be everywhere, splashes of shadow and color that he worked very hard to avoid looking at when he realized that he was catching bits of motion within them. Quiet voices, some raised in greeting to the professor and other softer murmurings, made him wish he could avert his ears as well as his eyes. Professor Snape ignored the greetings, sweeping on down the hall at a pace Harry had to trot to keep up with. Complaining never entered his mind, though his breathing was soon coming hard and fast.

It was a relief when they finally stopped in front of a large stone statue of a hunched figure leaning menacingly forward, wings jutting out from its shoulders. Harry swallowed hard and dropped his gaze as the wings lifted slightly, warningly.

The professor stated in an irritated tone of voice, "Circus peanuts."

Startled into looking up at the strange words, a tremor ran through Harry as the statue stepped aside and the wall behind it split in two. Reluctantly, he followed his guide past it, into the passageway it had been guarding. He dared a look as he passed, then had to fight the instinct to leap back as he found a hideous stone face mere inches from his own, staring at him, large teeth partially bared. Quickly, he returned his gaze to the floor and hurried past the monstrous statue.

He stepped up behind his guide onto a spiral staircase, and then almost fell as he realized the stairs were moving, raising them up. Closing his eyes and clenching his teeth, he waited, pale-faced, until the motion stopped. Cautiously, he opened his eyes to find the professor rapping at a large wooden door with a reddish-gold knocker.

"Do come in, Severus," a genial voice instructed. As the professor opened the door and stalked inside, Harry at his heels, it continued cheerfully, "And I see that your mission was successful! Excellent!"

The voice belonged to a tall figure with a long white beard, which flowed over bright blue robes with smaller patches of bright colors flittering about it, sometimes almost colliding. He moved out from behind the large desk as he spoke. Professor Snape stepped aside, leaving Harry with nothing to hide behind as the old man approached, one hand extended. Harry waited for the blow, eyes forward and slightly downcast, hands limp at his sides.

The old wizard reached down and clasped the child's right hand, shaking it twice. Harry managed to suppress the shudder that wanted to run through him at the contact, and reluctantly raised his gaze to see the welcoming smile and faintly concerned blue eyes of the old man. He dropped his gaze again quickly when his hand was squeezed slightly then released, and let his arm drop limply back to his side, waiting.

"Harry Potter," the warm voice said musingly. "My dear boy, it is quite wonderful to see you again. I held you as an infant, you know. I am Professor Dumbledore, headmaster of Hogwarts School."

The boy waited, perfectly still.

"Well, Mr. Potter?" his guide snapped. "Say hello."

"Hello, sir," he repeated obediently, uncertainly. He knew the word, of course- but he had never had cause to speak it or have it spoken to him. It felt odd in his mouth.

Blue eyes met black over his head and Professor Snape snorted. "We have a slight problem, Albus."

"Do we? Would you care for a lemon drop, Severus? Harry?"

"Certainly not!"

"No, sir. Thank you, sir."

"Are you quite certain, Harry? They're very good."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

"Very well, then. Have a seat, my boy," he added, gesturing towards a large comfortable chair just to the boy's side.

Harry's gaze jerked up incredulously and he stared for a moment before reluctantly dropping to perch on the edge of the chair, wondering what punishment he would have for so defiling furniture. He couldn't remember the last time he'd dared such an action. But no enraged shout was forthcoming. No swift fist lashed out to knock him from the seat. And he realized. *This* was what Uncle Vernon meant. Their seduction. Offering him things, having him sit among them- even touching him. Startled, he began to wonder if the taking of his hand had been intended as a punishment after all. Surely it must have been, and yet- it was so confusing.

"A problem?" the older wizard's gentle prompt drew Harry from his thoughts and he noticed that the two men had seated themselves, the headmaster returning to his seat behind the desk and Professor Snape taking a chair similar to Harry's a couple feet away.

"It seems," the professor murmured, a streak of dark enjoyment in his voice, "that the muggles were ... overzealous in their protection."

The older man's head tilted slightly to one side. "That hardly seems a problem, Severus."

"He has not left their house in nearly nine years."

Professor Dumbledore started visibly and his gaze turned from his colleague to the boy, who felt a shiver run through him at the weight of it until it returned to Professor Snape. Finally, the persistent smile gone from his voice, he said blankly, "What?"

"Apparently you told them that only their home was safe for the boy. They interpreted that to mean that he wasn't to be allowed outside the walls. The boy is terrified of the sky, Albus."

For a long moment the old man stared at him. Finally, he murmured, weakly, "This is ... unexpected."

"Your mastery of understatement will never cease to impress me."

Considering the ramifications of this news, the headmaster turned back to Harry and studied him for a long moment, noting his stiff posture and down turned gaze. "Harry, dear boy, how many people did your aunt and uncle introduce you to?"

"I'm sorry, sir," he answered softly, not looking up. "I don't understand."

"Other than your aunt and uncle - and I believe you have a cousin as well - aside from them, have you spoken with many people?"

"No, sir."

"How many, Harry?" the old man asked gently.

"Two sir," he replied, wondering if it were some kind of trick question. Questions with obvious answers were usually posed to bring a flaw to light. But usually he knew where his error lay. What had he done wrong?

"Besides Professor Snape and myself?"

"No, sir."

The headmaster sighed and the other teacher groaned. "You can't remember talking to anyone else, Harry?"

"No, sir."

"I see." He fell silent for a long moment, and Harry could feel eyes on him, studying him, though he didn't look up. "Thank Merlin there's five weeks left before school starts. This will not be easy."

Harry spent a split second frantically searching the room for another figure who he could thank as commanded, then remembered that Merlin was an historical figure by whom freaks swore. So the

statement had been rhetorical. The second part, however, could be answered. "Sorry, sir."

"Back to that, are we?" Professor Snape muttered irritably.

"Sorry for what, Harry?" the headmaster asked gently.

"For being an inconvenience, sir," he replied. "And for angering Professor Snape."

Professor Snape snorted and the headmaster laughed. "My dear boy! As I was the one who apparently provided the Dursleys with less than clear instructions I clearly brought any inconvenience on myself. Indeed I believe *I owe you* an apology."

That startled a horrified glance from the boy. "No sir!"

"And as for angering Professor Snape," he continued cheerfully, only a glint of concern showing that he'd heard the interruption, "he is quite used to being angry and you needn't give it another thought."

"So kind, Albus!" the potions master murmured ironically.

"Yes, but Severus, consider. It's not in the least fair to get angry with poor Harry for apologizing: when he apologizes you only get angrier. Besides, you are always so offended when apologies are *not* made."

"They lose impact and sincerity when delivered with every breath."

The headmaster shot a twinkling glance down at Harry. "Harry, would you ever apologize insincerely to Professor Snape?"

Harry fought back a shiver of pure terror. The last time he had been accused of an insincere apology was long enough ago that he couldn't remember the details of either accusation or retribution. But it had left him with the conviction that nothing short of magic was worse than not sincerely and whole-heartedly confessing to and apologizing for his many evils. "No, sir," he managed to force out in an almost normal voice.

"There, you see, Severus?"

Not dignifying that with a response, the younger man rose. "At any rate, Albus, I've delivered the boy as you requested and now I will leave you to it."

"Well, there *is* one more thing, Severus."

"No."

"What?"

"Whatever you are going to ask, the answer is no. I won't do it."

The old man grinned cheerfully up at him. Before responding directly, he turned to Harry. "Harry, my boy, would you be so kind as to step outside for a moment? Just outside the door. Don't go anywhere."

"Yes, sir," he agreed quietly and slid to his feet, then stepped outside and stood perfectly still, waiting. Professor Snape followed and closed the door firmly behind the boy, who didn't move a muscle. The voices inside resumed almost at once, quiet but clearly audible to a boy used to living in the absolutely silence of a soundproofed cupboard and searching for any hint of noise from outside. Especially one used to listening for any order given by his family, even a softly spoken instruction several rooms away.

"Now, Severus. Clearly Mr. Potter is unused to company and will be much more comfortable out of the main stream of things. You are the only staff member presently on the premises whose quarters fit that description."

"Hagrid is much more out of the way."

"Yes, but Hagrid's cottage is outside," the headmaster pointed out patiently. "Harry would need to cross the grounds at least twice daily. I believe we need to be a bit more patient than that with his fears."

"I don't have a guest room," Professor Snape pointed out reasonably.

"You will by the time you reach your quarters," the headmaster promised. "Hogwarts will contrive."

"Then let it contrive a different babysitter!"

"Severus," Albus murmured warningly, and Harry felt his skin crawl. That gentle voice was always the most dangerous. Gentle signified disappointment.

"Albus, no. It's madness. What would I, of all people, do with the boy?"

"It's only temporary."

"No. It's not temporary because I will not take him."

"Severus, I need you to do this. Please."

"No."

"Would you have an old man beg, Severus?"

"I would have an old man rediscover one or two of his wandering wits and find a solution that has some modicum of sanity, that is what I would have an old man do."

The headmaster sighed sadly.

Professor Snape snorted, unimpressed.

"One week, Severus. Share your rooms with him for one week and I'll get you the harder to acquire potions components you've been requesting. And a full flask of phoenix tears for good measure."

There was a moment's silence, then, in a different tone of voice, sounding a bit surprised, the potions master asked, "Where *is* Fawkes?"

"My dear, boy, did you think he reported his wanderings to me?" the headmaster asked, gently teasing. "He'll be back, though. You've no need to fear your supply of tears drying up." A pause then. "Give me just one week. Just evenings and mornings, you need not entertain him during the day. Please, Severus? One week?"

The younger man groaned. "Oh very well. But I want everything on that list. And then after this week of yours, I'll have three weeks in which no one in this school or on behalf of anyone from this school will attempt to contact me in any way for any reason. Up to and including dementors being released on the premises. Am I understood?"

"But of course, my dear boy. It shall be just as you say." An instant's hesitation, then, "Bring him back in, would you, Severus?"

There was a swish of fabric then the door opened. Harry turned to find Professor Snape glaring down at him. Silently, he followed the man back inside and waited. "Well, Harry, for a few days you're going to stay in Professor Snape's quarters. Is this amenable to you?"

"I'm sorry, sir. I'm not familiar with that word," he admitted, bracing himself for punishment.

Professor Snape snorted but the headmaster only sent the man a disapproving glance before smiling at Harry. "No shame in that. We aren't born knowing everything. I meant would that suit you? Will you be okay with that arrangement?"

The meaning had been fairly clear from context, but had thrown him because that was not the sort of question he was asked. Besides, he was always to volunteer his ignorance so that he could be punished properly. The time it took for the headmaster to explain was enough for him to realize that he was not going to be disciplined. And to recall that he was to answer the question and to gather himself to do so without showing his shock at being asked. "Yes, sir. I'm sorry for the inconvenience, sir," he added, turning to Professor Snape.

He was answered by a sneer from the younger man and a smile from the elder, who exclaimed, "Excellent! Severus, if you would take our young charge to Madam Pomfrey for a check up? And I shall see you both at breakfast tomorrow. Harry, my boy, truly it is a pleasure to renew your acquaintance."

"Thank you, sir," he said uncomfortably, then looked to Professor Snape, who silently swept out of the room. Harry hurried to follow.

They went down seemingly endless passageways. He wondered anxiously how he was ever to find his way around. Home could have fit a dozen times just in the halls he'd already been through! And there were so many more that they'd passed without entering. Eventually he was led into a brightly lit room, the walls startlingly white after all the stone.

A woman in equally blinding robes bustled out of a side room to approach them. "Ah, good! Albus told me you were coming. How nice to meet you, Mr. Potter." Turning to Professor Snape, she added, "And thank you again for the supplies of potions, Severus. Barring a year more accident prone than the one before last-" They both shuddered at the memory. "-this supply should last through the holidays."

"Very good. Let me know if you need anything else, of course. And Floo me when you're done with him," he added, casting a glance of loathing at Harry.

Chuckling, she waved him away, then turned cheerfully to Harry as the door closed behind the man. "Don't you mind him," she recommended, waving one hand towards the door to indicate the potions master. "His bark is worse than his bite."

"I'm sorry, ma'am," he said softly, perfectly still. "I don't understand."

"Oh!" she exclaimed, surprised. "I thought it was a muggle expression. But I suppose not all muggles use the same ones. I meant that he throws a lot of insults and sounds angry and mean, but he's got a good heart and would never harm you."

"Thank you, ma'am."

"Certainly," she smiled kindly down at him and gestured towards a bed. "Hop up."

He hesitated, uncertain. "Ma'am?"

"Just sit on the end of it, for now, please."

"Yes, ma'am," he acknowledged doubtfully. He approached the bed and turned, gingerly perching on the foot of it, careful not to touch the sheet with his hands.

"This won't hurt a bit," she informed him. "I'm just going to do some quick diagnostic charms to find out your general state of health. Just sit easy."

"Yes, ma'am," he replied reflexively, not relaxing.

She crossed the room, pulling her wand out of a sheath at her right hip, and picked up something from the counter with her spare hand. After a few waves of her wand and a few strange syllables spoken, she released the thing in her left hand, which kept moving on its own. Harry swallowed heavily and averted his gaze as she returned to him. She waved the wand in a complex pattern and spoke several incomprehensible syllables, then paused.

After a moment she began speaking in what could have been more magical phrases, but he recognized occasional connecting words and her tone was different than it had been the times he knew she was casting spells. So maybe this time the talking was medical rather than magical.

Finally the mediwitch flicked her wand, paused a moment, then said, "You have some rather nasty bruises on your stomach and chest. What are they from?"

"I was climbing on a chair to get a glass off a high shelf and I slipped and fell onto the chair," he replied, adding just a touch of chagrin to his tone, as he had been coached to do.

She winced sympathetically but relaxed slightly at the explanation. "Ouch! That must have hurt. Well, I have some salve that will get rid of those bruises in no time. Nothing to worry about there. You're also a bit small for your age, Mr. Potter, but your father came into his growth late also, and I daresay you'll catch up with and pass your schoolmates just as he did. What *does* concern me a bit is that you are quite underweight for your height and a bit anemic."

Again bracing himself for punishment, he apologized, "I'm sorry, ma'am, but I don't know what that means."

She blinked and colored slightly. "Of course you don't. I'm sorry, I was talking half to myself, I'm afraid. A horrible habit. Anemia is a condition you can have- it means you don't have enough red blood cells in your blood. It can make you feel weak and tire easily, get out of breath easily, and it can take away your appetite. That last is bad because the kind you have a bit of usually comes from not eating enough meat and eggs and dairy products, especially red meat, so not eating is not a good way to solve the problem. But now that we see it, it should be easy enough to take care of." She smiled at him. "Other than that, you're in pretty good shape, Mr. Potter. Very good muscle tone. Your lungs are a bit weak, but Albus mentioned your house arrest when he Flooed me," she said, lips thinning disapprovingly. Before he could say that he didn't know the term house arrest, she hurried on, "I daresay you didn't have much opportunity to run or get other aerobic exercise- that is, exercise that makes your heart beat faster and your breathing faster and harder?"

"No, ma'am, I didn't," he agreed. "Sorry, ma'am."

"Well, it's hardly *your* fault. We should be able to work on that, too. But for now let's do some quick hearing and vision tests and I'll Floo Severus to fetch you away for the evening. I daresay it's been rather a long day for you. First of all, you're going to hear some sounds of various types and volumes coming from all around. Just point to wherever you hear the sound coming from. Okay?"

"Yes, ma'am."

She cast a spell and he began hearing beeps and clicks and hisses and crackles from all directions, usually spaced out by about three seconds. After a few minutes the mediwitch waved her wand and the sounds stopped. "Very good," she announced. "You have exceptional hearing, Mr. Potter. Especially good for hisses, but well above average in every category. For eyes I just use the muggle way," she added, flicking her wand at the wall across from him. A large white chart unfolded itself on the wall. "Take a look at that chart, please, and tell me what the lowest row of letters you can read is."

Harry blinked. She had made a rectangle of white appear on the wall with a darker blur within, but letters? "I- I'm sorry, ma'am," he faltered. "I don't see the letters."

She started. "Even the one up at the top?"

He stared harder, squinting, and offered, tentatively, "E?"

"Well. Quite right but clearly you can't see it by much. I haven't the transfiguration skill to pinpoint your prescription the magical way, but I do have a muggle machine that works. And once I have that I *can* set a pair of glasses to it. Stay for a moment, Mr. Potter."

"I don't know the word prescription, ma'am," he admitted helplessly, this time not at all sure that she would punish him appropriately but not knowing whether that meant he shouldn't say it or not.

"I'm sorry. In this case it means the curve of the glasses lens needed to correct your vision. It can also mean a type and amount of a potion, pill, or some other medication that a medi-wizard or -witch assigns you to take." As she absently defined the word, she pulled open a drawer, removed something small, and set it on the floor. A murmur and wave later, it shot up to several feet tall and Harry watched through wide eyes as she rolled it over to stand directly before the boy. "A muggle machine- it's too large to store full-size all the time," Madam Pomfrey explained cheerfully. "So I shrink it whenever I'm not using it."

Soon he was looking through the machine and marveling as various lenses were passed before his eyes and the world sharpened and blurred before him. It was incredible. Suddenly he could see things across the room as clearly as though they were inches from his face. The changes grew smaller and smaller until it got difficult to answer when the mediwitch asked if one was clearer than another. Finally she pulled out a pair of wire-framed glasses from a drawer and touched first the right lens of the machine then the right lens of the glasses and concentrated. She repeated the process with the left lenses and pushed the machine a couple feet to the side before passing the glasses to Harry.

"Try those, please, Mr. Potter. I'm afraid you haven't any choice in frames for now. This is the only pair I have on hand."

Awkwardly, he placed the arms over his ears and settled the glasses onto his nose, then gasped. Amazing though it had been with the machine, having so much between himself and the view had made it somehow unreal. Now, though, with only this slim bit of metal and glass-

"Let's try this again. The lowest line you can read, please, Mr. Potter?"

Turning his attention back to the chart, Harry was struck dumb for a moment. The black lines seemed almost beautiful in their sharpness. The E he had blurrily guessed at before seemed absolutely huge now. He let his gaze drift down, enjoying the sensation of vision, admiring the sharp lines of the increasingly small letters. Finally, narrowing his eyes just slightly to be sure the fourth letter was a C rather than a G, he read the bottom line.

"Excellent!" Madam Pomfrey applauded, and Harry felt a shiver run through him at the unfamiliar approval. "Goodness, I don't know how you've done without them all this time."

For a long moment he hesitated, then, greatly daring, made himself ask a question. "Are you sure this isn't magic?" he asked, looking up at her face, noticing thin brows, warm brown eyes with small wrinkles at their corners, and brown hair with a few strands of gray in it.

She laughed, making her eyes dance and the lines around her eyes deepen and new ones form near her mouth. "Quite sure, dear. Muggles have done some remarkable things without magic and spectacles- eyeglasses, that is, are certainly among them. We can get you a magical pair that changes to match your prescription later. But, for now, these should do."

"Thank you, ma'am," he whispered, blinking at the 'dear' before staring wonderingly around, noticing a glass-fronted cabinet filled with potions he could almost read the labels of, the crisp folds of the linen sheet on the next bed, the flecked pattern to the tile on the floor. Catching motion out of the corner of his eye, he noticed a large

feather hovering slightly above a thick sheet of paper, three quarters filled with writing. It moved to write as the mediwitch began to speak to him, and his gaze flinched away from the obvious magic.

"You should have had them long since. Well. I think that's everything for now. Unless there's something you want to bring up? Sleeping poorly? Headaches? Anything else?"

"No, ma'am."

Crossing the room, she opened the glass-fronted cupboard and removed a small covered bowl. "This is the salve I promised for your bruises," she explained, passing him the bowl. "Slather it on morning and night for a couple days and they should vanish in no time."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Now, then, let me summon Professor Snape back and you can go down to your room." She bustled over to the fireplace, removed a handful of powder from a bowl on the mantle, and tossed it into the fire. The flames shot up, bright green, and she stated, "Professor Snape's quarters."

Harry quickly averted his eyes as the professor's face appeared, wreathed in green flames. For the first time he regretted his newly acute vision as green flame licked the face and danced in black eyes.

"Ah, Severus. We have just finished up here and you can come collect Mr. Potter."

"Delightful," he muttered.

Harry raised his eyes as he heard a flapping sound and swallowed as he saw that Professor Snape was now in the infirmary with them, brushing soot off his robes.

The man sneered at him, taking in the new glasses, and muttered, "As though he didn't look enough like his father already."

"Now, now. The poor boy saw like his father, as well as looking like him, poor thing, and I'm surprised he hasn't killed himself stumbling around blind before now," the mediwitch stated softly.

Ignoring the comment, the professor announced, "We'll go back the long way. Children are ridiculously messy with Floo powder and I'll not have my quarters full of ash."

Madam Pomfrey rolled her eyes but nodded. "Very well. Off with you both. If you are in any way injured or ill, Harry, don't hesitate to return."

"Yes, ma'am," he acknowledged, sliding off the bed and checking quickly to be sure he hadn't mussed the sheet before following as Professor Snape swept out the door and into the passageway beyond. The graceful billowing of the man's robes was fascinating and for a long minute Harry's attention stayed fastened on it before a sudden greeting made him turn. He blanched in dismay as he saw the speaker was the occupant of a large portrait who was waving as they passed. Professor Snape ignored it and kept walking, and Harry hurried to catch up. But having seen it he found it impossible not to notice the other paintings they passed. Portraits of figures who talked and bowed and called out greetings to the passersby. Landscapes with clouds that rolled across the skies and trees that trembled in the wind and sheep that moved as they grazed. A still life of a bowl of fruit- and as they passed it a large hand reached into it from nowhere and popped two grapes off their stem before retreating.

They saw nobody as Snape strode through the hallways and down staircases, Harry half jogging to keep up. Soon they were in a colder, darker part of the castle, most of the walls rough, undecorated stone. Harry shied away from the dark side passages, jerked back from the couple statues whose heads turned to watch them pass, and finally settled for walking so close on Professor Snape's heels that he could see nothing around the billowing cloak. So close that when the man abruptly stopped Harry plowed into his back. He fell back with a horrified apology and would have fallen had the man not spun about, impossibly quick, and grabbed his elbow, steadying him.

At the touch, Harry stopped trying to pull back, standing perfectly still, ready to accept whatever punishment was forthcoming.

For a moment they stood there, poised, then Professor Snape removed his hand and looked thoughtfully down at the pale face of the child before him. Finally he turned to a large portrait of a scribe working frantically at his desk and cleared his throat.

The scribe pushed brown hair back from his eyes and glared up. "Your timing is as atrocious as always!" he snapped. "I found the most fascinating treatise on- but I'd rather continue it than discuss it, so go *in* already, and let me get back to work!"

As it spoke, the portrait swung open, revealing a room on the other side, and the professor waved for Harry to enter. Terrified but knowing he already deserved enough punishment without adding direct disobedience to the reckoning, he slipped forward, through the opening, past the freakish painting, and into a room of quiet dignity and comfort. All the lines were smooth and clear, wood molding perfectly polished but without carved decoration. The floor was a shining dark gray tile and the furniture sleek cream leather. A single area rug with a geometric pattern in dark green and cream padded the floor between the couch that dominated the center of the room and a huge stone fireplace across from it. A big armchair sat near the side of the fireplace, angled slightly away from it, and bookcases of some goldish wood lined most of the walls. There were two doors in the wall opposite the painting they had entered through and two more on the wall opposite the fireplace, a few feet behind the couch. There were no lamps or lights that Harry could see, yet the room was filled with a soft bright light offering full illumination without tiring the eyes.

Following him in, Professor Snape eyed the nearer of the doors behind the couch with irritation. "That, I suppose, would be your room" he commented, moving forward to throw open the door.

The room was about the size of Dudley's second bedroom. It housed a twin bed heaped with blankets, the top of which was a rich dark blue and looked incredibly soft, a dresser, an empty bookcase, and a small desk and chair. A door to one side was open to reveal a closet

only slightly smaller than his cupboard, and beside the bed stood his suitcase.

"This will suffice, I hope?" the professor demanded.

"I-" he was about to object that he didn't want so much more than he deserved, and bit himself off as he recalled that he was to play along and not obviously spurn their seduction. "Yes, sir," he said quietly. Then wondered if he had been mistaken and it was, after all, a test to see if he knew his place, as black eyes flashed in irritation.

"It may not be a palace, Potter," the man snapped, "but you'll receive no special treatment while you are with me, so you'd best gratefully accept what you're given."

"Yes, sir," he agreed, uncertain as to what he had done wrong, but recognizing it, too, whatever it was, as deserving of punishment. "Sorry, sir."

"Sorry for what?" the man demanded.

"I'm sorry that I don't know what I did wrong, and I'm sorry for doing it, sir."

The answer seemed to make the tall man even angrier, and Harry dropped his gaze, waiting for the first blow to fall. It never did. Patiently he waited for further instructions.

Finally the professor asked, "Are you hungry?"

"No, sir," he replied quickly, pleased that he'd gotten that, at least, right. He had been fed two days in a row and was as far from hungry as ever that he could remember.

"Sulking, are you? Well. Do it on your own. Come out if you change your mind. And as you're only here a few days there's no real point in unpacking your suitcase. But do so if you choose." Not waiting for a response, the man left the room, closing the door behind him.

Harry hesitated, not sure what he should do. He took an uncertain step towards the bed and reached out to touch the cover with one

finger, but shuddered and jerked back from the soft opulence of it when he was a hairsbreadth away. Even to keep up appearances he couldn't go so far above himself. How was he to improve, to fight being a freak, in such a room as this? He set the pot of salve down on the dresser, knowing that he couldn't use it. Punishments were not to be healed.

For a long moment he stared desperately about. The, inexorably, his gaze was drawn to the closet and he realized what he had to do. Taking a breath to steady himself, he went to the closet, entered it, and pulled the door shut behind him, sealing himself into the dark. He curled up on the floor, angry with himself for missing his thin nest of rags as cold seeped into him from the hard stone floor. He didn't deserve such comforts. He turned so he couldn't see the thin line of light marking the bottom of the door, and pretended he couldn't hear the soft sounds of Professor Snape moving about the room beyond his and the various creakings and groanings of the castle.

"What are you?" he imagined being asked. And obediently began his catechism.

Harry woke to pressure in his bladder and a sense of total displacement and confusion. The floor was too hard and cold and the space just felt *different*. Narrower and taller. The quiet seemed much ... noisier than he used to- small, unfamiliar sounds filtering in to him rather than the absolute smothering silence he was used to. He began trembling as the memories came flooding back. He was alone in a place of magic and evil, surrounded by enemies he had to placate and fool. Forcing back the fear, he rose and hesitantly opened the closet door, then stepped out into the black void of the room beyond.

If the silence was less intense than he was used to, the darkness was far more. Only in his cupboard had there ever been so little light that shadows couldn't survive. Even the basement was lighter, its grimy windows a touch paler than the rest of the room on even the darkest nights. Nervously, he felt his way across the room, jerking back as his hand brushed something as soft as Aunt Petunia's velvet gown. The bedspread, he realized in dismay. But at least it meant he was near his trunk. Hesitantly reaching out again, he found and opened the trunk. He pulled out neatly folded clothes by feel: socks, underwear, blue jeans, and a T-shirt, and pulled them on. The socks felt odd on his feet- he had always gone barefoot before yesterday. But he was always to wear socks and shoes here, Aunt Petunia had said. His shoes he had kicked off in the night, so he returned to the closet and felt around until he found them. It took a moment to release the tangle the laces had become, but he sorted them out and pulled the shoes on, retying them carefully. He also retrieved his toothbrush, ashamed to realize that he had failed to use it the night before. One so filthy on the inside must strive to be clean at least on the outside.

Gathering up the previous day's clothes, he wondered helplessly what to do with them. He hadn't been told where to do the laundry, or even where to find supplies for any of his other chores. Perhaps they would tell him today. How could he ever find something in this incomprehensively *big* place if they didn't tell him? That thought led to another: in so large a place he would *never* be done with his chores. Surely, it could never all be clean at once? He'd never be locked

away and forgotten again- there wouldn't be time! That jubilant thought was tempered by the knowledge that not finishing his chores was bad, and he could never hope to finish. But it was the kind of bad punished by beatings, not by being sealed into the dark, silent loneliness of his cupboard.

"Aren't you awake *yet*?" an irritated voice interrupted his musings.

"Yes, sir," he replied quickly, realizing that he had already messed up again, not correctly anticipating what was wanted of him. "Sorry, sir," he added, feeling his way to the door and opening it. The brightness beyond it was blinding after the darkness, but he forced his eyes to stay wide open. They adjusted quickly, and the pile of laundry in his arms that he was training his gaze on became blurrily visible.

"Where are your glasses? Go put them on."

He went back to the closet, picked them up, and set them carefully onto his face, a ripple of wonder running through him once more as everything shot into focus. Turning, he found sharp, black eyes staring quizzically down at him.

"What, may I ask, were they doing on the closet floor?" Before Harry answered, the professor snorted and shook his head. "Actually, I don't think I want to know. But that is no way to treat glasses. Keep them on your face or on the table beside your bed. Or, while you're showering, set them on the counter. *Never* on the floor. Am I understood?"

"Yes, sir. Sorry, sir."

"With reason, this time! Will wonders never cease? Well? Wash up and get ready for breakfast," he snapped.

"Yes, sir," Harry acknowledged, and then hesitated.

"Well?"

"Sorry, sir, but- where, sir?"

Black eyes closed for a long moment and long white hands clenched at the wizard's sides. Finally, eyes still closed, one hand rose and Harry felt a tremor of expectation run through him. Instead of hitting him, however, one finger extended from the fist and pointed to the door beside Harry's.

"Thank you, sir." He took a deep breath and added, "Where should I do the laundry, sir?"

"Drop your clothes in the hamper in the bathroom. They shall be dealt with," the professor stated in a tone of strained patience.

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir," Harry murmured apologetically before diving through the indicated door, eager to be out of sight by the time the man opened his eyes. Only after closing the door behind him did he take a moment to consider the words. They would be dealt with? What did that mean? It almost seemed to suggest that someone *e/se* was to do the laundry? Mind whirring, he looked around the room, startling himself with the sharp lines and details granted by the glasses. It was a large room with a black marble tub filling one corner of it, a sink and counter, also of black marble, along a wall to one side. The clothes hamper seemed somewhere incongruous- a large wicker barrel of a thing with a subtle weave providing a simple pattern to it. He stared for a long moment at the complex interweaving of the slender willow rods, fascinated. Finally, shaking himself out of it, he hesitantly dropped his clothes into it, atop black garments that obviously belonged to the professor. He wasn't supposed to put his things with others', but the man had *said* to, so Harry did it. That task complete, if not satisfactorily so, Harry emptied his bladder with a sigh of relief.

Turning to the tub, he found the plumbing a bit different than he was used to, but after a moment's consideration he was fairly certain he could work it. He undressed, folded the clothes neatly, and placed them on the farthest corner of the floor from the tub. Remembering his recent instructions, he carefully removed his glasses and set them down on the counter beside the sink. Then, stepping into the tub, he pulled across the curtain, and turned the left knob. Cold water began streaming from a low spigot. Pulling a knob atop the spigot caused the water to stop flowing from there and, instead, to come out of the

shower head, pelting him with icy water at much higher pressure than the one at home did. The water seemed colder than it did at home, but hot was too expensive to be wasted on a freak. Gritting his teeth, Harry quickly scrubbed himself clean using a bar of soap that smelled mildly of something pleasant and didn't leave his skin feeling stiff and itchy the way his usual bar did. He suspected that it was the Professor's own soap, but it was the only one there. He scrubbed a bit of it into his scalp and used it to wash his hair as well. There was a bottle of what he assumed was shampoo, as well, but he had always been instructed to use only the bar.

Harry rinsed off, turned off the water, and shook some of the excess off him before stepping out of the tub. Still wet, he pulled on his clothes without even glancing at the fluffy towels hanging beside the tub. Usually he brought a rag to dry off with, but he had no rags here. Quickly and efficiently, he brushed his teeth with a vaguely minty paste that, again, he was sure was far too good for him.

Finally, glancing around, Harry's eyes widened in dismay. He'd left a puddle on the floor and there were several smudges on the mirror and the counter near the sink. He paused a moment, eyes darting around the room in search of something to clean with. Finally, gaze settling on the laundry basket, he crossed the room and removed yesterday's shirt. Carefully he used it to polish away the smudges, then soaked up the water on the floor before putting it back, careful to let it touch only his own things.

Reluctantly satisfied that the room was as clean as he could make it without more supplies, he slipped out to stand passively before the professor, waiting.

The man's thin brows rose in distaste. "You're still soaked. Are you too good to use borrowed towels?"

Recognizing a question with no acceptable answer, Harry prepared for a blow as he answered softly, "The towels are very fine, sir." Much too fine for him to foul with his touch. But he wasn't allowed to apologize properly- they were pretending his touch was not foul, and he must play along.

Eyes down, he waited for a blow to fall and felt himself tense very slightly as he heard a whisper of wood on wood and a swish through the air. He waited for the switch to open up his cheek or lash across his shoulder, preparing for the pain, ready to accept his punishment becomingly. Instead he was shocked into a visible shudder as he was surrounded by a warm blast of steam that annihilated the chill of the shower and left him ... dry. Magic, he realized with revulsion tinged with ... pleasure. And realized that he was as bad as Uncle Vernon said. He must be, if he could feel pleasure at the unnatural sensation.

"Come," the professor snapped, turning in a swirl of black cloth and leading him out of the room.

Obediently, Harry followed, this time careful not to move so close that he would run the risk of running into the man. With his earlier thoughts about cleaning still in mind, he allowed his gaze to wander a bit. There was, as he had expected, a great deal to do, he decided with a touch of satisfaction. This corridor was quite clean, as were most of the large ones it crossed. The smaller passages, though, and many of the rooms he glanced at as they swept past showed signs of neglect. Many of them were very much in need of a good scrubbing. Enough to keep him busy for a very long time to come, if only he could find supplies. But surely they would tell him? Could they expect him to just know? Aunt Petunia expected him to just know where everything was, but he was the one who put it there. Perhaps other people knew, though, even in places they had never before been. He couldn't remember ever learning the layout of the Dursley's house, but he knew *it*. Maybe it was supposed to be the same here.

His train of thought was abruptly derailed as Professor Snape threw open a large wooden door and led him into a huge, well-lit room. His gaze slipped up, against his will, and then froze as he found himself staring into an endless expanse of blue and white. He could see the clouds moving more clearly now, roiling and changing shapes as they floated across the hall. His eyes widened and he began to shudder in abject terror, the stone floor feeling weak and insignificant beneath him. The sound of voices reached his ears, excited, confused, anxious. Emotions such as those could have no relevance to him, and his subconscious recognized that and ignored them, keeping his attention locked on the threat of the sky. The touch of skin to his hand

combined with his complete disorientation and terror, actually shocked him into jerking his hand away.

Immediately, the realization of what he had done broke through to him, and the enormity of his transgression drove the blood from his face. His fear of the sky faded before a more immediate danger as his eyes jerked down from it to stare up at the professor as he returned his hand to its original position with a forced, "Sorry, sir."

Black eyes caught his and he managed to banish the sky altogether from his mind as he focused on this smaller, safer void. Then it occurred to him that he was meeting somebody's eyes as though he were an equal. Hurriedly, he dropped his gaze to his feet with another muffled, "Sorry, sir."

An irritated snort answered him. "If the first was for getting caught up in the sky, what was the second for?"

"Sir?" he asked, confused.

"If you're going to be apologizing with every breath, I'd at least like to know what you're apologizing for. The first, I assume, was for giving in to your agoraphobia. Fear of open spaces, or, as in this case, the sky," he added as Harry's mouth opened hesitantly to ask. "What, then, of the second?" Harry realized with a shock that he *should* have apologized for giving in to the fear. It hadn't even occurred to him. He swallowed, knowing it would be a special punishment. Possibly a day locked up as well, or even longer. "I'm sorry," he whispered, thoroughly ashamed of himself.

"For *what*?" the man all but shouted in exasperation.

"For giving in to my fear of the sky and for not apologizing for that earlier, sir."

"Then what *were* you apologizing for earlier?" he demanded.

"For pulling away when you touched me, sir. And-" he broke off. Meeting eyes was one of the things normal people did, and they were pretending that he was normal. So he shouldn't have apologized for that, after all. But he had been so bad. "And for staring, sir," he

finished quietly. That, he thought, was rude even for people who weren't bad. And it was close enough. He waited for the punishment that always followed admission of guilt, and felt lost and confused when it failed to come. How could he hope that one day he'd defeat the wickedness in him if he was not punished when he was bad? He would have to be vigilantly aware of his actions and report them to Uncle Vernon when he went home so that he could be properly punished. He fought back a convulsive swallow at the thought of days or weeks of errors all being paid for at once. But what other hope did he have?

"Potter!"

"Yes, sir! Sorry, sir!" his gaze flicked up, horrified by his distraction- and he caught a glimpse of endless blue and felt his stomach clench and his knees weaken. He began to fall and was caught by two strong hands gripping his shoulders. The contact again broke him back out of fear of the sky, as fear of the wizard and the punishment snapped back to the front of his consciousness. Submitting to the touch, he waited for the pain that was sure to follow. At least the touch wasn't skin to skin. Even as he had the thought, his left shoulder was released and the hand took his chin instead, turning his face until there was nowhere his frightened gaze could go but into cold black eyes. How could the man bear to touch him? And how could *he* have been so bad as to deserve it?

"Mr. Potter. Harry."

The voice broke through his thoughts and he trembled again as he realized he had been ignoring the man, lost in his own thoughts, as though they could hold any worth. The hand on his shoulder tightened slightly and he forced himself again to passive stillness. He had no right to fear. "Sor-"

"Don't even say it. Now. Mr. Potter, you are in an indoor room. There is a ceiling above you, but it has been charmed to resemble the sky. I should have warned you of it and I apologize for not doing so," he added sourly.

Green eyes widened silently in shock and fear. What was he to do when somebody apologized to him? He was not worthy of apologies.

Fortunately, the man didn't seem to expect any response and continued without pausing. "Focus your eyes on the wall. There," he instructed, releasing the boy's chin to extend one long thin finger, pointing to a point low on the wall across the room.

Harry obeyed, not letting his eyes slip up towards the endless blue.

"Move your gaze up the wall very slowly," the professor said quietly, dropping the hand he was pointing with, the other remaining lightly on Harry's shoulder, a reminder of what could be done to him if he lost focus again. "If the wall begins looking vague or fuzzy, stop and keep focusing on that point until it seems clear again. Very slowly. This is not something you can make easier by rushing."

Again, Harry obeyed. He raised his gaze by tiny increments and paused whenever his vision blurred or faded, waiting until the wall came reluctantly back into focus. He followed it as the wall hit the ceiling and began to curve inwards. He followed it until he was staring at the center of the domed ceiling, the image of the sky thin and clear just below it, easy to ignore.

"Very good," the man beside him breathed. "Remember how it feels to focus like that, Mr. Potter. It will permit you to see the ceiling rather than the sky in this room. Or to see past any other illusion that has been created without additional magic to prevent it being seen through. If you have any trouble, start again out of the range of the magic and then, slowly, move in."

"Yes sir."

"Look at something else for a moment, then look back. Try to see straight to the ceiling."

"Yes, sir." He dropped his gaze to his feet, examining the lines of the stone floor for three long breaths before looking back up. For a terrifying moment it was the same overwhelming emptiness, but almost immediately his eyes refocused and he calmed again as he found the ceiling once more.

"Excellent!"

For an instant he was warmed by the approval in that tone. Then he remembered. This was magic- he had to be *bad* at it. Had to fail. He tried to back out, to be unable to see through the illusion once more, but he couldn't manage it. Uncle Vernon was going to be so angry with him.

"That out of the way, let us proceed," the tone was cold once more, but at least the hand dropped from his shoulder.

"Yes, sir," Harry acknowledged, following the professor to the long table at the front of the room. His breath caught as he saw how many people were at it. All of their eyes were locked on him, and he froze, one foot slightly in the air, under the weight of all those stares before carefully lowering it and waiting, tense.

Movement caught his eye and he saw a tall man with twinkling blue eyes and a long white beard who he realized must be the one he had met last night, rise to his feet. Now he was in bright green robes with little yellow balls darting about it almost faster than Harry's eyes could follow. A tall pointed hat rested on his head, and his face, now that Harry could see it clearly was strange- lined and wrinkled.

"I am delighted to see that you have both survived the night." Dumbledore chuckled, and then sobered. "And this excitement this morning- I apologize, my boy. I have grown so used to the Great Hall's magic, I fear I had forgotten that it would not be so pleasant a surprise to you as it is to most. You seem quite recovered, I am pleased to see," he added, eyes turning inquisitively from Harry to the potions master as he finished.

"It seemed worth delaying breakfast for a moment while he learned to see past the illusion," Professor Snape answered the unspoken question.

"Ah," the headmaster murmured, eyes flicking down the table as the statement was answered by several gasps of surprise, resting on Harry for a moment, then, twinkling, returning to the potions master. "In, er, one easy lesson?"

"So it would seem. I have always thought it was over-taught," he added with a sneer at one of the other teachers at the table. "Much

easier to work out if you aren't convinced that it's practically impossible."

"It is a very complicated-" Harry turned to look at the speaker and found a woman with pale brown hair and flashing hazel eyes glaring at Professor Snape, half-rising with her hands braced on the table.

"Now, now, Professor Mungrove," the headmaster interrupted her, smiling. "You and Professor Snape can argue it out later, but, for now, let us recall that Harry is not used to being among so many people and provide him with a peaceful introduction."

The woman sniffed with irritation but sank back into her seat under Dumbledore's cheerful gaze, which turned back to Harry. "We shan't expect you to remember everyone right off, Harry, but I thought we should at least run through introductions. Okay?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very good. Your present host, you know, of course. Our potions master, Professor Snape. And you have met Madam Pomfrey, our talented medi-witch, and myself. My deputy is also the transfiguration instructor, Professor McGonagall." A tall woman with a stern face who wore square-framed glasses and her graying hair up in a tight bun, nodded to him with a thin smile.

And then another name, another face, and another. They were all so extraordinarily *different*. Different from one another and different from the Dursleys. There was one that was hardly taller than Harry himself, but obviously adult and wearing a beard nearly as long as the headmaster's. Another was as wide as Harry was tall and towered over everyone present. He burst into noisy tears when he was introduced. And size was only one of the things that changed from one to the next. They wore different styles, had different colored hair and eyes, differently shaped faces- there was nothing of them that was *not* different, that he could see. It was disconcerting.

At long last, the parade of identities came to an end and the headmaster smiled down at the child. "Well! That's accomplished! And breakfast much delayed: you must be starving! Come have a

seat and we will see what we can do to remedy it," he stated, patting the chair next to him in obvious invitation.

Harry forced himself to move around the table, past all of the teachers and staff, a couple of whom actually reached out a hand as though to touch him before jerking back. Only halfway expecting a shout this time, he set himself gingerly on the indicated seat and stared down at the empty wooden table, the incredible whirls and lines of the wood grain distracting him somewhat from the stares.

"I believe breakfast may be served," Dumbledore announced.

Harry jumped in his seat as a plate appeared before him, directly over the wood he had been studying. Looking up, he found that a glass of some orange fluid and a set of silverware had also materialized. Similar settings were in front of each of the others present, and large platters and bowls and pitchers loaded with food and drink were spread across the table.

The professors began serving themselves, and the headmaster smiled down at the boy beside him, who was staring down at the bounty, unmoving. "Help yourself, my boy."

"Thank you, sir. I'm not hungry, sir."

Black eyes turned sharply from several seats away, at the end of the table, and Professor Snape, ignoring the others between, snarled, "Ridiculous. You didn't eat last night. Of course you're hungry."

"I ate at home, sir."

"Whatever farewell feast they offered must have worn off by now."

"Please, sir, I'm not hungry."

"A growing boy?" This time the voice was from the headmaster's other side and Professor Snape turned back to his own meal as Madam Pomfrey joined in the fray. "Remember what I said about lack of appetite, Mr. Potter? I'm afraid you must eat even if you are not very hungry. As your blood balances out you'll find the task less trying."

"Yes, ma'am," he conceded, reluctantly. He removed the top slice of toast from a stack before him, eyeing the melted butter atop it distrustfully. He took a tiny bite and forced himself to chew. There was a murmur beside him and he almost dropped the toast as it was abruptly covered in a thick coat of marmalade.

"Try some bacon," Dumbledore suggested cheerfully, and several pieces floated onto the boy's plate.

"I'd- I'd rather not, sir."

"Nonsense! We have the most excellent bacon here, my boy, it's one of the great benefits of living at the school."

Unwillingly, Harry picked up a slice and nibbled at it. The flavor was as indescribably wonderful as he remembered. He wasn't intended to eat food that tasted like that. It wouldn't stay down. His stomach began to roil as he finished the first bite of the first slice. The old man waved heartily to show he was to continue. Abruptly, it occurred to him what they were doing. It made a kind of sense- they couldn't punish him normally because they were pretending he was good. So instead, they gave him things that if he really *were* good would do him no harm, but, being as he was, would make him ill. Accepting that it was a punishment, he ate a little more willingly. A deserved punishment should never be delayed.

Glancing down, he saw that another slice of toast had been added to his plate along with a small mountain of eggs scrambled with cheese. He swallowed down nausea but wouldn't object to a punishment. Trying not to see the food, he began to eat it without looking about to see the pleased, faintly relieved expressions of the adults around him. He ate almost half of the mountain of food before he was in imminent danger of making a mess. Making a mess was always bad, but making a mess in response to a punishment was unforgivable defiance.

"Sir?" he turned to Dumbledore, as the one who had assigned the punishment.

"Yes, Harry?"

"May I please be excused to use the toilet?"

"Yes, of course, my boy."

"Thank you, sir," he rose, then hesitated. "Where is it, sir?"

"Out through the door you came in, turn right, and it's the first door on the left. Would you like someone to show you?"

"No, sir. Thank you, sir."

"Okay, then. Come back when you're finished and we'll discuss how you'll spend your days for the next little while."

"Yes, sir." Showing as little expression as he could, Harry moved around the table, out of the Great Hall, and followed the instructions to the toilet. His punishments were for his own good, so any discomfort they caused him should be kept to himself, and not inflicted upon others. Showing it suggested that he was looking for sympathy, which would only be appropriate if it was undeserved. Otherwise, showing illness or pain was pure defiance. Defiance was bad.

He found the toilet, but it looked nothing like he expected it to. A row of sinks stood on one side with a row of doors, set very close together, opposite them, all ajar. On the far wall stood a line of porcelain things shaped vaguely like elongated, seatless toilets. Desperately, he peered through the first of the doors and found, to his relief, a normal toilet. The plumbing to the back was odd, but the bowl was perfectly familiar, and he threw himself to his knees before it. Giving up the fight to keep the food he had eaten down, he gagged. Even after there was nothing left in his stomach, his body continued to heave in rebellion.

At last, feeling weak and drained, he fell still. For a long moment, exhausted, he allowed his forehead to rest on the rim of the toilet. Clenching his eyes, he could feel tears escape the sudden pressure and roll down his cheeks. Horrified, he rubbed them off with the back of his hand. Uncle Vernon would be so mad at him. He rose smoothly to his feet, resisting the urge to steady himself against the thin wall to the side, and examined the toilet. It didn't look like the ones at home,

but one piece of metal stuck out from the rest, so he pushed on it experimentally and was gratified to find that water rushed into the bowl and swirled away the mess. He took a deep breath, wiping his face of emotion, and stepped out of the tiny room, into the larger. He washed his hands, made a cup of them, and gathered water to rinse his mouth. It tasted unpleasantly of strong soap, but it replaced the acrid tang of bile. He swallowed the handful of water, rinsed off his flushed face, and dragged one arm across it to dry it. His hands he dried on the thighs of his pants. A glance in the mirror told him he bore no sign of discomfort, so he turned, left the room, and returned to the Great Hall.

For a split second he froze, panicked by the sight of the sky. Then, without any conscious decision to do so, his eyes refocused and the sky vanished leaving only a thin wisp of blue hovering below the plaster ceiling. He took a breath, furious with himself for again using magic, but not able to completely regret it since it got rid of that horrid blue void. Silently berating himself, he crossed the room and stopped before the huge table, head bowed, waiting for the headmaster's instructions. They had been talking and laughing before he entered the room, but had fallen silent when he came in. He could feel the weight of all their eyes on him as he stood, waiting to be assigned his chores.

"Are you still hungry, Harry?" Professor Dumbledore's voice seemed loud in the silence.

"No, sir," he whispered, hoping that his punishment was complete for now, that they wouldn't force him to start all over.

"Very well. For the time being, I believe it would be best if you focused on orienting yourself to the castle. It is confusing to all newcomers and given your ... unique situation, I suspect you shall have more difficulty than most becoming comfortable here. I believe the best way to go about it is to simply let you wander about. I have been considering the best way to allow this without endangering you, and have come up with several safeguards, which I believe shall do rather nicely.

"First, you shall have a map. A yellow line shall mark the easiest path from your current position to the Great Hall. Blue will lead you to your quarters, which presently means Professor Snape's quarters, of course. If one of us should want your presence for some reason, the map shall rustle to get your attention and a path leading to where you are wanted will glow purple.

"Secondly, I shall place a charm on you that will allow any of us here to track you, should the need arise.

"And lastly, Mr. Filch has agreed to send Mrs. Norris (his cat, if you recall) to check on you periodically and she shall fetch him to you if you are in any difficulty." A thin, angry-faced man glared angrily down at Harry from under long, lank, gray hair, one hand caressing the ragged fur of the cat held in his other arm.

"We spent the weekend warding any dangerous rooms and passages, so if you try to open a door and it won't open, or you attempt to move down a passageway and cannot, simply don't. The map will also warn you of such places, our wards will be marked down in red to warn you off."

The old man paused, looking expectantly at Harry, so he acknowledged, "Yes, sir."

"Good. I shall also have the ghosts keep an eye out for you. I have warned Peeves to leave you alone. He is our resident poltergeist, you know, and a bit of a mischief-maker. I fear his spirits are too high for him to take such warnings to heart for any length of time, but I believe he'll leave you be for at least a week or two. Now. Have I forgotten anything of importance?" he asked, looking up and down the table.

"Lavatories," Professor McGonagall replied succinctly.

"And food," Madam Pomfrey chimed in. "I should like Mr. Potter to be able to eat whenever he is hungry, for now, rather than only at scheduled mealtimes."

"Ah, quite so. Green, then, shall lead you to the nearest boys' toilet, and orange to the painting that opens into the kitchen. It is a bowl of fruit, and you must tickle the pear to gain entrance. The house elves

will be more than happy to feed you any time at all. And since the number of paths seems to be growing, I shall also add a key to the map to keep track of what is what. All clear?"

"Yes, sir," he agreed, although he had never actually used a map. He'd seen some in his lessons with Aunt Petunia, in Dudley's textbooks for history and science, but had very little experience with them and this sounded quite different than what he had seen before.

"Very good! By the time school starts up I should like you to be able to find the Great Hall from anywhere in the castle. Also you should be able to find each of the commonly used classrooms, my office, and your room- which shall, of course, be changing next week," he added with a grin at Professor Snape, "from here. All of this you must be able to do without the map, which I shall have to take away when the students come back. In, oh, three weeks time I'll remove the lines so you have only a map, but no directions, and for the last week or two we shall give you some increasingly difficult tests to ensure that you have learned enough. You have six weeks before the students' return, which I hope will be ample. At that point, we'll have to remove all the safeguards, although some of the wards will remain in place. I feel certain that you will be ready by then. For the time being, however, I expect you to spend your time exploring and learning the lay of the school. I hope it won't be too arduous a task," he finished, eyes twinkling expectantly.

"Yes, sir," he acknowledged, mind racing as he tried to determine whether or not he had to be bad at this, since it wasn't really magic. In fact, since the *map* was magic, the more he learned the less he would have to depend on magic. Perhaps it would be okay to try hard? But it was all so very confusing.

For some reason, the headmaster seemed a bit taken aback by his response, but, after a moment, he smiled and took a large piece of parchment from a pocket it couldn't possibly have fit into. He drew his wand with a flourish and, cast several spells upon the map before passing it across the table to Harry. "There. The modifications have been added," he announced.

Harry accepted the magical map, trying not to touch it any more than necessary. The spells placed on him followed, and he managed to suppress a shudder of revulsion as he felt strong forces swirl around him before settling over him like a blanket.

"Breakfast and dinner you shall have in the Great Hall," Dumbledore informed him cheerfully, while rising to his feet. "I fear they are not always so peaceful as today, I requested that everyone refrain from overwhelming you, which they apparently took to mean total silence. Now that you have some idea of how many there are of us, I daresay you will become more comfortable with all of us talking at once, as we seem to do all too regularly," he added, casting a humorous glance up and down the table, pausing significantly on a couple faces. "Professor Snape shall bring you to breakfast and the map will guide you to dinner. We tend not to assemble for lunch during the summer, so for that you can raid the kitchens whenever you feel a mite peckish." He resheathed his wand, and tapped one finger thoughtfully on the table. "There was something else, I am *quite* sure... Ah! A warning. The map will show you only the floor of the castle you are presently on. For now, of course, the paths will lead you to the staircase necessary to reach your destination. But I did want you to be aware of it so that you wouldn't worry if, for example, you climbed a tower and the entire school appeared to vanish."

"Yes, sir," he agreed uncertainly. "Thank you, sir."

"Very good. Enjoy your explorations, my boy!"

Never having been given a remotely similar instruction before, Harry was a bit taken aback, but he managed a doubtful, "Thank you, sir."

"Off with you, now," the headmaster said with a smile, making little shooing motions with his hands.

"Yes, sir," he said, moving once more out of the hall. As he closed the door behind him, Harry heard several voices begin speaking at once.

The cat yowled angrily as she dropped to the floor, and Harry, chest stinging from the raking of claws down it, remained carefully relaxed and said, "Sorry, Mrs. Norris."

The problem was that he didn't know what she wanted. She had first glared at him, so he had stopped wandering down the corridor he was presently exploring and waited uncertainly. He wasn't sure how to treat animals. The headmaster had referred to sending her to check on him, however, so he assumed he was to obey her. They had stood still for a long moment, she studying him as he stood, uncertainly waiting. At last she had advanced forward and started moving in complex patterns about his ankles, rubbing herself against his legs, tail hitting his hand. He managed not to flinch away from the contact. Then she had risen upon her rear legs, laying her forepaws on his thigh, and shoved her head into his hand. He apologized for the contact, remained passively still, and wracked his mind for what he had done wrong. Finally she had restored her forepaws to the floor, backed a couple feet away, and then launched herself at his chest. He had fallen back half a step under the unexpected impact, then caught himself with a flinch as needle-sharp claws dragged down his chest, paused for a moment when the fabric of his shirt stopped moving and didn't rip, then released as the cat dropped back to the floor.

Now she glared at him, tail lashing from side to side, the motion somehow reminiscent of Uncle Vernon stretching his belt before using it. He waited, but the cat finally just stalked away.

Aunt Petunia said cats were filthy, vermin-ridden animals whose only redeeming quality was that they were noisy only when fighting or mating, as opposed to dogs, which were *always* noisy, as well as being filthy and vermin-ridden. Besides, she would add, they make poor Dudley sneeze. Harry had never seen an animal larger than the bugs he hunted down when they entered the house before coming here. Mrs. Norris did not have the appearance of a creature Aunt Petunia would approve of even were she fond of the species. The skeletal frame of the cat was covered in patchy, dull, grayish-brown

fur from which puffs of dust rose whenever she moved too quickly. Her ears didn't have quite the same shape as each other, and her eyes, which were large and an almost glowing yellow, glared balefully from her graying face.

Harry wasn't sure how to treat her. As a rather ragged version of an unclean beast, perhaps it wasn't so bad that she had touched him? But she'd been angry- he'd clearly done something wrong. He resisted the urge to sigh- yet another event to report to Uncle Vernon when he finally made it home. He would know what Harry had done wrong and whether he needed further punishment than the scratches on his chest. He concentrated for a long moment on the events, making sure he remembered them clearly, then started once more down the hall, glancing down to see the intersection of lines marking his position inch its way across the parchment. With a shiver, he returned his gaze to the walls.

He was growing fairly good at using the map. He could guess the size of rooms before entering them, judge about how long it would take him to reach the end of a passageway, and when following the colored paths he could usually figure out the turns without rotating the map about. But he had no real sense of things yet. Just that it was vast and that everything from the staircases to the paintings to the doors were magical. Even the air, it sometimes seemed.

Over the course of the day, he had seen two glowing, pale-gray forms that he had recognized as ghosts. The first was a short, rotund man with his hair cut into a strange ring around his head who wore plain robes. He had introduced himself as the Fat Friar and asked if he could be of any help to Harry. Harry had kept his eyes locked on the floor and politely denied any need of assistance. It continued asking questions for a bit and he answered as briefly as he could, knowing he should not be speaking to a thing such as this. Finally it went away. The second, sometime later, was immaculately dressed in the kind of formal robes Aunt Petunia had showed him pictures of, heavily blood stained. At least, he assumed it was blood, for without color he couldn't tell for sure. And he certainly wasn't going to ask. He had dropped his gaze quickly, but not before seeing the spectre's thin lips twist into a sneer. When he finally felt the cold eyes were no longer on him, he dared glance up and found that it was gone.

Other than they, he had seen only Mrs. Norris who had looked in on him several times, and innumerable pieces of art, all of whom seemed aware and active, although considerably fewer expressed any interest in Harry. Most completely ignored him, for which he was profoundly grateful.

As Mrs. Norris vanished around a corner, Harry resumed his path, following the line to the kitchen to be sure he could. Gradually the line shrank as he worked his way along its length, and finally, as he came to a stop before a large painting of a basket of fruit, there was hardly a speck of orange left. Hesitantly, Harry reached out and drew one finger across the painted pear, so lightly he could hardly feel it. The image shivered and giggled, then turned into a doorknob. Reluctantly, he reached forward and opened it.

The kitchens were brightly lit, warm, and full of small ugly creatures with huge ears. They were dressed in scraps of household supplies and were all busily cooking and cleaning. Several looked over as Harry entered, then one hurried over, bowing. "Mr. Harry Potter, sir, Tozzy is honored, is delighted to meet you. Food Mr. Harry Potter would like, yes? Of course sir would!"

As it spoke, it gestured wildly, and a table appeared by its elbow and was immediately laden with food he summoned from across the kitchen. Fruit and bread and meat and cheese and even a small pie.

Harry looked on in horror as the creature bowed and spoke and summoned. "N- No," he whispered. "No, thank you, I'm not hungry."

"Not hungry is Mr. Harry Potter, sir?"

"Please- please will you just call me Harry?" he asked hopefully, wondering what his uncle would do to him for letting someone- anyone- speak to him so respectfully.

Dead silence as every one of the creatures stopped what they were doing and turned to stare at him. He looked around desperately, eyes wide.

Finally they started whispering amongst themselves in awed voices, still looking at Harry. After a long moment the one before him

whispered, "Mr. Harry Potter sir really and truly is liking to be called Harry?"

He thought about that for a moment, trying to understand past the word order, then nodded. "Yes, please. If you don't mind too terribly."

It shook its misshapen head in wonder. "As Mist- as- as Harry says, then. Yes Harry will be so called. And would Harry to eat like?"

"N- No, thank you," Harry replied hesitantly. Then took a deep breath. His emotions were getting the better of him, he shouldn't be stuttering like that. "Is there anything that I can do here?" he asked hesitantly, looking hopefully towards the depths of the kitchens where elves were busily chopping and stirring and washing.

"Oh, no, Mi - Harry!" Tozzy exclaimed, scandalized. "Harry is not cleaning and cooking for masters! Tozzy would be a most bad house elf to let Harry do such things."

"I'm sorry," he whispered, locking his gaze on the floor, belatedly realizing that of course they wouldn't want him touching their food. "I'll get out of your way then," he said, backing towards the door.

"Harry always is most welcome," Tozzy assured him. "If Harry is wanting anything at all, he is only to be calling and house elves will be very most happy to help him in any way. *Most*, most honored is us."

The chorus of squeaked agreement startled Harry and he looked around to see what looked like hundreds of them staring at him. He swallowed heavily. "Thank you," he answered, uncertainly. He chanced a look up and found them all staring at him with wondering eyes. "I'm sorry," he apologized uncertainly. "May I leave?"

"Of course," Tozzy stated. "Harry is doing as he is liking. But in the kitchens *a/ways* welcome is Harry."

"Thank you," he repeated. "Excuse me." He turned and moved through the strange silence out of the room, carefully hiding his discomfort.

He resumed his explorations and continued on until the light in the outer rooms was turning rosy with the setting sun and his map rustled politely to draw his attention. Harry's gaze dropped to stare at it in shock and he fell perfectly still, his usual response to surprise, as any kind of jump or cringe was unacceptable. Despite the colored path marks he had half forgotten the magic and was unpleasantly startled by the reminder. The path leading to the Great Hall was brightly glowing and faintly pulsing. Harry stared at it for a long moment, resisting the need to throw it from him in disgust. Finally, he turned and followed the path to the Great Hall, looking down every few steps to be sure he was going the correct way.

At last he reached the hall and slipped into it, not letting his gaze turn fearfully towards the image of the sky. The staff was, once again, seated at the head table, and all fell silent to look at him as he stepped into the room. He froze, wondering what he had done wrong. When he was good nobody paid any attention to him.

"Ah, Harry," the headmaster called, rising to his feet. "I see you have learned the basics of following the map. Excellent! Come along up here and sit, my boy."

Obediently, Harry approached, moving around one end of the table and behind the teachers on that side to take the seat he was motioned towards, between the headmaster and his deputy. Reluctantly, Harry sat on it, wishing he could kneel, as he always did at home. This unaccustomed position made his back ache. But nobody else complained of it, here or at home, so it was probably another sign of his badness. He kept silent, accepting it as another unusual punishment.

As he sat, quiet conversations sprung up among the various teachers and he blocked them out, though keeping an ear cocked for any orders directed towards him.

"Did you find the kitchens successfully?" the headmaster asked genially.

"Yes, sir."

"I'm sure the house elves were most hospitable."

"Yes, sir," he agreed again.

"Good, good." The man clapped his hands and the table was suddenly laden with place settings and food. Harry remained perfectly still. "The service is actually their magic, you know," the headmaster commented, heaping Harry's plate with food, then turning to repeat the process with his own. "Quite dramatic, having it on my gesture, of course, but the clap is only a signal, not magic itself." He paused for a moment, then released a tiny sigh.

Harry forced himself to relax slightly, to release tension in preparation for the blow. He wasn't sure what he had done wrong, but the sigh was a clear sign of displeasure.

"Well, eat up, my boy," the headmaster said, his jovial tone sounding a trifle more forced than usual.

"Yes, sir," he agreed, accepting the punishment, although he couldn't quite suppress the defiant wish that it was just a beating as he lifted the forkful of shepherds' pie towards his mouth.

He ate slowly, pacing himself in hopes that it would let him complete his punishment without an inappropriate display of defiance. The headmaster continued to speak to him, Professor McGonagall occasionally interjecting a comment in her dry voice, and he listened carefully for signs of what was expected of him. But it seemed so ... inconsequential. They gave no orders, asked for no reports of his misbehavior, assigned no punishments. It was almost like how the Dursleys spoke to one another, or how the other professors were conversing. It was quite disconcerting.

He grew more uncomfortable with every bite, but managed to put off his need to flee to the toilet until some of the teachers were also showing signs of being finished. He'd managed to force his way through about a third of the mountain of food placed before him.

"May I be excused, sir?" he asked, keeping his desperation firmly hidden.

The headmaster turned to glance down the table at the mediwitch before, reluctantly, nodding. "If you're certain you are finished you may. The map will lead you to your chambers by curfew."

"Thank you, sir," he stated, then left the table to go quickly to the toilet to release the results of his punishment.

Leaving after he cleaned himself up, he paused as he saw Mrs. Norris stalk by, clearly ignoring him. His gaze followed her for a moment, and he was startled when she suddenly leapt at the tall thin man who had been holding her this morning. The man's arms rose to catch her and one bony hand began to move through the cat's fur, scratching behind her ears. A strange rumble began to move through the little creature and its eyes half closed. Harry wondered if this had, perhaps, been what she wanted of him earlier, as well. It seemed strange that she should want *him* to touch her, but she had jumped in the same way and had clearly not been pleased with his reaction.

"What are *you* looking at?" the question growled in a voice of loathing broke him from his reverie, and he dropped his eyes instantly.

"Sorry, sir."

The man stalked towards him, and Harry stood perfectly still. "You're all the same, you damned students. All thinking you're so much better than everyone else," the man spat out the words glaring down at the child before him.

"I'm very sorry, sir," he repeated, forcing the tension out of his shoulders.

"Mr. Filch," the stern word came from Professor McGonagall, who Harry had half-heard leaving the Great Hall as he watched Mrs. Norris's activity. "That is enough."

Harry didn't move a muscle, making himself relax still further at the displeasure clear in her voice.

"He was being rude, Professor," the man complained, a hint of a whine in his voice.

"Recall that Mr. Potter is not used to a great deal of interaction. I am certain he meant no offense. Did you, Mr. Potter?" she asked, moving forward to stand between the two, just to one side.

"No, ma'am," he assured her softly. "I'm very sorry, sir."

Mr. Filch snorted, turned, and stalked away, still caressing the cat with one bony hand.

The professor moved around to stand directly before Harry, and he waited hardly breathing. It took all of the control he'd developed not to flinch when a hand gently touched his cheek then ran through his hair. He looked up uncertainly, and found her stern face had softened slightly. A hint of a smile turned up her lips. "You do bring back memories, Mr. Potter," she murmured, a thread of sadness in her tone.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," he apologized, not letting himself tense up and dropping his gaze again.

"Oh, Harry." The hand ran through his hair again, then, to his alarm, she dropped to one knee, so they were on a level with each other. "Your mother's eyes," she murmured. "And your father's hair, as indomitable as his spirit. Their deaths were a sad loss to us all, Harry, and if seeing you brings back that sadness, it also brings back the joy. And there is a great deal of joy- they both were so very full of love and life. I wish you could have known them better. But never apologize for reminding me of them, Harry. There is so much more good than bad in the memories."

"Yes, ma'am," he agreed, reluctantly, feeling a deep ache in his chest. He had known that they would tell lies about his parents. What he hadn't realized was how much hearing the lies, knowing that they could never be true, would hurt. He forced himself to ignore the tightness in his throat, to keep his breathing steady.

"Look at me," she said more briskly, tone suddenly self-disparaging as she rose to her feet. "I'm turning into an emotional old woman." She ran her hand again through his hair, and he accepted the touch with mingled pleasure and horror. The horror compounded by the fact of the pleasure- a touch could only be a punishment, and he shouldn't

get pleasure out of his punishments. He bit back a frantic apology with the realization that the pretense would not leave him with a proper explanation for the apology. "Don't worry too much about Mr. Filch," she told him. "He is not fond of children, but he'll do you no real harm."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Should you need anything, Mr. Potter, my office is always open to you. Or if you 'd like to talk about your parents. They were both in my house, you know, and I knew them rather well."

"Thank you, ma'am," he forced out.

One of her hands reached out again, and Harry half-hoped, half-feared that she was going to run it through his hair again, but she stopped herself with a tiny laugh. "So much your father's hair. Off with you now, Mr. Potter."

"Yes, ma'am," he agreed quietly, and walked down the hall, away from her.

He continued his experiments with the map until it once again ruffled, this time the path leading to Professor Snape's quarters summoning him. He followed it obediently until he reached the painting of the scholar, and then hesitated. His instinct was to knock, but touching the painting couldn't be appropriate. Before he could figure out an acceptable way of announcing himself, the painting snapped open, the potions master framed in the doorway beyond.

"Well?" the man snapped. "What were you waiting for?"

"I'm sorry, sir. I wasn't sure how to knock."

"One does not *knock* on paintings," Snape sneered. "One asks the portraits subject to announce one's arrival."

"Yes, sir. Sorry, sir."

Black eyes glared down at him. "And for now, this is your room. You needn't ask permission. Just tell Jacob, here, to open up," he stated,

waving one thin hand at the painting. The scholar steadfastly ignored them both and continued with his work.

"Yes, sir," he agreed, moving into the room as the man stood aside.

"Clean yourself up and go to bed, then."

"Yes, sir," he repeated, turning to the bathroom. He brushed his teeth and took a quick, cold shower. After cleaning up the small room, he left it.

Snape, stretched out on the couch, looked up from the large book he was reading and glared. "I had thought we discussed the use of towels this morning?"

"Yes, sir," he admitted.

"Then why, pray tell, do you stand there dripping on my floor?"

"Sorry, sir," Harry said, looking anxiously down to see if he was, indeed, making a mess. He wasn't. As he'd thought, he'd dripped and used the corner of his shirt enough to ensure not spreading water across the room. Arguing the point never occurred to him.

"Go," Snape growled through clenched teeth. "Use a towel and dry off."

"Yes, sir," he acknowledged, returning to the bathroom and stripping off his clothes. He examined the towel rack in hopes of finding one clearly inferior, but it was not to be. All of them were large, fluffy, clean, dry, and even slightly warm. More magic, he realized with a shudder. Hesitantly, he pulled one down, took a deep breath, and quickly and thoroughly dried off. Finishing with his body, he spent a minute roughly toweling his hair, then carefully returned the towel to the rack, a little apart from the others in hopes that he could reuse it in the morning rather than befouling another. He ran his fingers through his hair several times to tame it as best he could, then dressed again and left the room, looking nervously at the professor for approval.

"Ah. So you *are* familiar with the rudimentary basics of personal grooming. Very good. Go to bed."

"Yes, sir," he acknowledged, going into his room and closing the door behind him. He removed the glasses he was already becoming so familiar with wearing, casting the room out of focus, and set them on the table beside the bed. Then he moved unhesitatingly to the closet and closed it behind him, sealing himself into the dark, trying to ignore the line of light around the door that made it seem so different than his cupboard. He curled up on the floor, facing away from the light, and began his catechism.

He had scarcely begun when the sound of his bedroom door opening startled him to his feet and he opened the closet, stepping out into the brightly lit room.

The professor stared at him, blankly. "What, in Merlin's name, were you doing in the closet, Potter?"

"I-"

"Never mind. I'm not at all certain that I wish to know. I realized that I had not given you control of the lights. You should have said something."

"I'm sorr-"

"Don't!" Snape cut him off. "I've adapted the charm to partially connect it to my rooms and to answer your spoken commands without additional magic. If you say 'lumos' the ceiling will begin to glow. Saying 'nox' will turn them off again. When my lights turn off for the night it will override yours. Understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good." He swept back out of the room, closing the door firmly behind him.

Harry hesitated for a long moment but, finally, whispered, "Nox."

Immersed in darkness, he returned to the closet, beginning his catechism once again with a heartfelt, "I *am* a freak."

He woke early the next morning, unaccustomed to being left to himself without work for so long, and spent the time until he began hearing movement from the next room considering what to do. He decided to continue his explorations in a more systematic fashion. The previous day's haphazard wanderings had familiarized him with the map but did very little to further his understanding of the castle's layout. He got up to present himself when he heard the professor moving about the main room.

After cleaning up, eating, and throwing up his punishment, he returned to the hallway outside Professor Snape's quarters, and looked at the map. There was only one staircase down from this floor, and he quickly found it and followed it down. Consulting the map again, he found that there was no way to go deeper, so he found a path to the nearest outside corner of the castle, and began moving down every passageway, trying every door, and exploring every room, working to remember what each room contained and how the various hallways were connected. He also noted how well kept they were, keeping a mental inventory of where he should return when he'd found cleaning supplies and was given free time to begin work.

It was late evening when he discovered a smallish storage room containing every cleaning supply he'd ever seen and quite a few he hadn't. He spent an hour moving to the room from various places, ensuring that he would be able to locate it again in the future before, reluctantly, moving on.

Mrs. Norris checked in on him only three times and each time just glared at him before stalking away.

The next day he continued where he had left off, finishing the lowest floor and continuing on to the next. In the middle of the day, Mrs. Norris forgave him his past transgressions enough to once more leap at his chest. Recalling Filch's actions from before, he awkwardly raised his arms to catch her. Keeping perfectly still as she butted her head against his unresponsive hands, forcing himself to remain relaxed at the occasional strange rumbles that he more felt than

heard her give. That rumbling felt so odd that he wondered if it, too, was some strange kind of magic. Eventually, over the next few days, he discovered that the rumbling was her sign of approval and a flick of her claws was her mark of censure. In her ways she was as skilled at getting her feelings across as Uncle Vernon, and before long he was feeling horribly guilty as he deliberately touched her, rubbing her neck and scratching behind her ears, rewarded by a rusty rumble that seemed to somehow warm him from within. He was convinced that he shouldn't take pleasure from such a thing, but it was so impossible not to. She came to find him with increasing frequency as the days passed, and began to remain with him for longer. Whenever anyone else was around, she pointedly ignored him.

On his fourth day of explorations, he stepped into a room on the third floor, and immediately paused, looking slowly around it in confusion. He looked down at the map then turned back to the room itself. It was much too small. Experimentally, he moved across it, one eye on the map, and saw the intersection of lines marking his present location moving much more quickly than it usually did. Finally, he decided to come back when he'd finished his first sweep, but not to worry about it for the moment. That day, too, he convinced the house elves to give him a slice of bread with nothing on it, though it took some doing.

His routine remained the same for several days. He got another slice of bread from the house elves every three or four days, just before his stomach began to announce his defiance to the world, and found that it was best to get it as soon as possible after dinner or he needed more sooner. He also found another of the storage closets full of cleaning supplies on each floor, and marked its location carefully in his mind. The first real change in his routine came the following Wednesday, the one-week mark of his stay at Hogwarts. That morning he got up and was immediately on his guard, as Professor Snape seemed even more short-tempered than every other day. Harry tried not to upset him further, but everything he did seemed to infuriate the man. And *still* he didn't lash out. Harry found it incomprehensible and more than a little alarming.

Finally, they moved down the halls to the Great Hall, Harry hurrying in the professor's wake, as usual. Entering the room, he found

Professor Dumbledore looking unusually pleased with himself and the other members of the staff also looking uncommonly cheerful.

The old man rose and beamed at him as Harry entered, stopping the boy in his tracks.

"Happy Birthday, Harry!" he called out merrily.

Harry's breath hitched, which drew his attention together enough to force down the panic. They'd said this might happen, but he'd never really believed-- but now was not the time. He had a part to act. "Thank you, sir," he forced himself to say, loudly enough for the words to cross the huge room. He froze for an instant as a dim echo returned to him, unused to hearing his voice bounce back, then continued moving forward to take his usual seat, politely thanking the various instructors for their murmured congratulations.

"I've arranged a small party for you for this afternoon," the headmaster said cheerfully as they began to eat. "Just a few children your age, you know. I had first thought to invite some who were a little older so that you'd know a few children who were coming to school this year, but getting their Hogwarts letters does tend to make children a little arrogant towards their younger acquaintances for a little while. Not always, of course, but we didn't know anyone personally well enough to be sure that wouldn't happen. At least, none without a number of siblings who would also have to be invited, and I didn't want to overwhelm you by having too many people who already knew each other well." He paused, expectantly.

"Thank you, sir."

"I'm sure you're nervous about meeting other children after being alone for so long, but it's only a half dozen so it shouldn't be too bad. And given that soon the students will be coming for the year, it's best to get started."

"Yes, sir," he agreed, reluctantly nibbling a slice of bacon.

"After the party we're going to see if we can't sort you into a house early. There are precedents, of course. Just nine years ago Suzie Cater was admitted a year early. Sorted into Ravenclaw-- not surprising, as the reason she applied early was because she'd started reading her older brother's school books and stealing his wand to practice spells-- and doing them rather better than he, I might add," he chuckled. "In other times children who have been in danger, who we felt would be safer within the wards of Hogwarts, have been

brought in early as well-- rather like yourself. We try to do the sorting a head of time, though, because there have also been a couple times the hat has refused to sort someone into a house early, and that's something it's best not to discover in front of a school full of students. Terribly rare, but it's best to be on the safe side."

"The last time was seventy-three years ago," Professor McGonagall agreed. "Peter Keshum. A year later he sorted into Slytherin without any problem, though. We never did find out why the hat wouldn't sort him early."

"If that should happen, we'll think of an alternative plan for you for this year," Albus said cheerfully. "Terribly unlikely, but no harm either way. And after the Sorting, a few of us have arranged some small gifts for you, and decided we'd do our gifts after dinner. No need to overwhelm the children coming by surrounding them with future teachers, after all!"

Harry ate another bite of egg and wondered if he could skip the rest of his bacon. Then he silently chastised himself for the thought and ate another strip.

"This morning, though, Madam Pomfrey would like a follow up visit with you. After that, can you find your way to Professor McGonagall's office?"

"Yes, sir," he acknowledged, remembering seeing it on the map and having gone past it a couple times though he had never ventured inside.

"Very good. She'll help set you up with robes."

"Sir?"

"Well, you've been in muggle clothes thus far, but you'd look out of place in a wizarding gathering. We'll go out and get some made up for you before school starts, but Professor McGonagall can transfigure a set that will do for today."

"Yes, sir. Thank you."

Half an hour later, he was seated once again on the edge of a bed in the infirmary with the nurse murmuring spells around him. She smiled. "The bruise on your chest is all gone, I see," she said. "You must have been very good about remembering to apply the salve-- I rarely have so obedient a patient. Did you use it all?"

Harry ducked his head. "Not all," he answered, reminding himself that it wasn't *really* a lie, since he didn't say he had used any of it. He didn't believe himself.

"Interesting. I would have thought it would take all I gave you to heal it so completely. Let me just check on your nutritional health..." She cast a couple more spells and a small line formed between her brows. "Almost no change. Wait for me one moment please, Harry, while I Floo Professor Snape for a brief discussion."

Harry waited uncertainly, keeping his eyes averted as the room flickered green. Almost immediately the potions master's deep, irritated tones answered. "Severus, have you made any progress on the alternative NutriSupp potion?"

A snort. "I have not. You said it was not urgent and how you could expect me to find a potion that will not react badly to him without a blood sample to find out why it would react badly is an absolute mystery to me. I've never so much as heard of anyone having negative side effects from NutriSupp."

"Well according to my *effectum aegrototio* it would be a terrible idea to give it to him."

"Are you sure you cast it right?" he demanded. "I've never heard of anyone having any side effects with it."

"Do I ask you if you did *your* job properly, Severus?"

"I could have sworn that was what you were doing just now!"

"Well, I'm glad you didn't-- I should hate for you to perjure your soul over such a matter!" she responded tartly. "I am not saying anything was wrong with your potion-- I am saying that it will not react well with this particular child's body and magic and will you make another that

will work properly without causing adverse reactions? Note, if you will, that I say 'will you' and not 'can you.' I am well aware that you *can* do so if you choose. Have as much faith in my abilities within my field, if you please. I don't believe I've given you reason to doubt me before!"

Dead silence for a long moment, then he stated curtly, "Provide me the blood sample, then, in a stasis vial. And don't expect an answer soon. I won't look at it for at least three weeks."

"What?" she demanded, indignation so strong in her tone Harry felt a tremor shoot through him.

"Albus granted me three weeks of freedom, I'll be damned if I'll spend them catering to the needs of the Boy who Lived. I'll expect the vial," he snapped back, and the green glow to the room vanished.

"Well!" she huffed disapprovingly, then returned to Harry, lips pinched into a tight line. "He's in fine form today, I see. I'm sorry, if I'd known he was going to be so rude -- and I should, I've known him for years, after all -- I'd have Flooed him from my private office and not troubled you with hearing the conversation. But since you have, let me explain what we were talking about. We have a standard potion for anemia but when I cast my charm to test for side effects, it showed that it would interact badly with you and cause all kinds of unpleasantness. So I've asked Professor Snape to create an alternative potion-- which you may be assured he will do quite effectively when he has time. Although if it were more urgent he would *make* time," she added critically. "But, as I say, it's a very minor problem and a bit of a wait won't do you any harm-- I wouldn't have troubled him at all except that it is so very strange that it hasn't improved. I'd just go to someone else except Professor Snape really is the best. I wouldn't trust anyone else's results half so far and by the time they reached them, his three weeks would be over and he'd have made something better. So for now we'll continue as we have been, making sure you eat well-balanced meals."

"Yes, ma'am," he agreed when she paused.

"Good. That's it for me, then. Off you go to Professor McGonagall."

"Yes, ma'am," he repeated. "Thank you, ma'am." He slipped carefully off the bed and out of the infirmary before unfolding his map and making his way to the transfigurations professor's office

There, he spent over an hour standing still, every drop of willpower he had devoted to not cringing away as a sheet draped about his shoulders first took the form of robes and then altered into what felt like hundreds of variations of style and color under Professor McGonagall's watchful eyes and flicking wand. At long last she settled on a relatively simple set of dark green robes that fell to just short of the floor and fit closely for the last three inches of wrist. Whenever he was distracted from the fact that it was a thing of pure magic and he was wearing it, he found it surprisingly comfortable. The rest of the time, he moved as smoothly as he could, trying not to touch the fabric. She released him to entertain himself until quarter to twelve, when he was to meet the headmaster in the Great Hall, with a stern warning not to rip or dirty the robes.

Harry obediently kept the robes perfectly clean by hardly moving until it was time to meet the headmaster. He cautiously entered the room to find that the large tables had vanished and in their place were two much smaller tables, one only a couple of feet square and the other, a few feet away, large enough to fit eight or ten comfortably, but not more. The room looked startlingly large and bare. The headmaster was standing in the center of the room, beside the smaller table, with Professor Flitwick and Madam Hooch to his side, and Harry was gestured over to stand in front of him. He had hardly taken his position when the large outer door opened and a woman led in two girls, pulling a little at each when they paused to stare up at the ceiling. They were the same height and had the same face, it seemed to Harry. Small features, eyes so dark a brown they seemed nearly black, and skin darker than he'd ever seen any of the Dursleys. One had long hair and flowing pink robes and the other wore her hair shorter and robes of light green and cut along simpler lines. The woman, also dark-haired and dark-skinned, flowed forward and smiled warmly at the headmaster.

"Professor Dumbledore, how excellent to see you again! Thank you so much for inviting the girls! Filius, Xiomara, it's been so long! And

this must be Harry Potter," she exclaimed, turning to Harry and releasing the two girls to take hold of both Harry's hands.

He looked up at her uncertainly, and found her eyes searching his forehead.

"Such an honor to meet you, Harry! I knew your mother a little, you know," she smiled and her eyes finally dropped to his. He lowered his immediately, but not before she said, "You have her eyes, though I'm sure you're getting sick of hearing it."

"Thank you, ma'am," he murmured, forcing his hands to remain passively in hers.

"What a little gentleman! Let me present my daughters-- this is Parvati," she released his right hand to gesture forward the girl in pink, who smiled brightly and shook hands with him. "And this is Padma. They're twins, of course." The second girl moved forward until she was past her mother, then rolled her eyes and grinned as she shook hands. "And you girls remember Professor Dumbledore, don't you?"

"Yes, mum," they chorused, Parvati smiling up at the headmaster, while Padma's gaze wandered about the room.

"And these are Professor Flitwick, the charms teacher, and the flying instructor Madam Hooch."

The girls announced their pleasure in making acquaintance and the teachers responded in kind.

"I *am* sorry to hurry off, Professor, but--"

"Nonsense, my dear," he interrupted genially. "Don't give it another thought. "I'm just glad the girls could come. The other children will be along shortly-- you'll probably pass them on your way back to Hogsmeade, in fact."

"I'll be back to collect the girls around five, then?" she asked, releasing Harry's hand almost reluctantly, with one last long stare into his fringe.

"Perfect," he agreed.

"Very well, then, I'll just be off--"

"Mother," Padma interrupted. "Our gifts?"

The woman threw up her hands in dismay. "Oh dear! I almost forgot!" She reached into a pocket of her robes and Harry swallowed as she pulled out two packages, neither particularly large, but neither small enough that they shouldn't have made a noticeable lump in her robes. Albus gestured towards the smaller of the two tables and she sent them floating over to land atop it with a wave of her wand.

"Have a very happy birthday, Harry," she said, smiling down at him, eyes flicking down to his again. "It was nice to meet you."

"Thank you, ma'am," he murmured.

Before she was out of the hall, an old witch in green robes with a furry red scarf and a hat topped with a huge, ugly bird advanced into the room. One hand was propelling a stocky blond boy with watery blue eyes forward as she marched across the hall. "Albus," she stated, "Filius, Xiomora, you're all looking much as you always do. This is the Potter boy, then?"

"A pleasure as always, Mrs. Longbottom. Yes, this is Harry Potter. And how are you and Neville these days?"

"I always enjoy excellent health, Albus. Only the weak-willed suffer from colds," she added with a stern glance down at the boy, who was surreptitiously wiping his nose with a grubby handkerchief. He went bright red and stuffed it into his pocket. "Neville, you remember Professor Dumbledore, do you not? Where are your manners?" she demanded after a disapproving sniff.

"Sorry-- I'm very pleased to see you again, sir," he said as though reading a script.

"And the other two professors?" she prompted.

"Professor," he hesitated then gasped almost desperately, "Professor Flitwick! And Madam Hooch-- it's very good to see you both."

"You as well, Neville," the charms teacher said cheerfully, nodding so quickly he seemed almost ready to lose his balance. Madam Hooch merely nodded a sharp greeting, golden eyes glaring at the older woman.

"And this is Harry Potter-- what do you say?" Mrs. Longbottom plowed on, ignoring the glare.

"I'm very pleased to meet you and wish you a very happy birthday," he recited.

"Thank you," Harry forced out, shifting slightly as he heard one of the girls beside him giggling.

"Well? Don't stand there like a lump, boy, put your gift on the table!"

"Sorry!" he gasped, turning hurriedly to the table and setting down his package, almost knocking off one of the ones the girls' mother had left, though he managed to catch it in time.

"Mr. Zabini, Mr. Bones, excellent to see you again," the headmaster's genial call drew attention away from the flustered boy to the newest arrivals, who were just entering the hall. "Susan you've grown inches since last I saw you! And this must be Blaise? I don't believe we've met before."

"I haven't had that honor, sir," the tall, slim boy answered easily as he reached the group, and bowing a greeting, flashing a smile. "But I've been looking forward to it for a long time." He stepped forward, navy robes swirling slightly about him. "Coach Hooch," he added with a slightly wider smile at the woman who grinned down at him and nodded back. "And I'm afraid I haven't made your acquaintance yet either, sir," he added, politely to the tiny charms instructor.

"Ah, my apologies. Blaise, this is Professor Flitwick. Professor Flitwick, Blaise Zabini. I believe you know Susan Bones. And Susan, this is Madam Hooch, the flying instructor here at Hogwarts," the

headmaster stated. "You, I believe, do know Professor Flitwick." The girl nodded cheerful greetings.

Blaise turned to bow to Harry, holding out one hand as he rose, and gray eyes slipping up towards his forehead only for an instant before locking on Harry's nervous gaze. "Happy birthday and it's very good to meet you."

"Thank you," Harry repeated. "You as well." He exchanged greetings with Susan, whose brown eyes never dropped from his forehead, and then looked quickly over at the headmaster as the old man clapped his hands.

"We're all here! You were all most prompt, for which we are grateful. Thank you all for coming to help us introduce Harry to the joys of a wizarding birthday."

"You're sure you don't need anyone else to stay, Albus?" the tall fair man who had been addressed as Mr. Bones asked. "I've nothing pressing to get to."

Chuckling, the headmaster shook his head. "Not at all! Most of the staff came back early this year, so we'll summon them if we need further help. I'm sure we'll manage."

A loud snort echoed through the room and the old woman in the hideous hat uttered, "Manage! I'm sure you've no intention of doing any such thing. You'll spoil the children rotten. I've half a mind not to leave Neville at all."

"Now, now, Mrs. Longbottom," Mr. Zabini murmured. "I'm sure one day of spoiling won't ruin all your years of child raising-- indeed, you can look on it as a kind of test," he added as the old woman opened her mouth to speak again. Neville gulped audibly at the description, but fell silent as Blaise stepped on his foot. "Will you do me the favor of your company back to Hogsmeade?" the man continued, holding out one arm. "Marie was saying just yesterday she wished she knew where you obtained the hand lotion you shared with her the other day. Will you tell me so I can win her gratitude by passing it on?"

"You Slytherins are a charming breed," she stated. "But I've seen smoother. Oh, very well, the boy can stay. And if you choose to think it's thanks to you, you're as much a fool as the boy himself," she added, silencing Neville's cheer at her permission with a glare as she lay her fingertips on Mr. Zabini's arm.

"Of course," he agreed, leading her back across the hall, talking quietly all the way.

The other man, who had watched their interaction with a grin, shook his head in amusement, took a small wrapped parcel from his pocket, and added it to the stack. "I'll be back this evening, then," he said to the headmaster, then turned back to the knot of children. "Nice to meet you, Harry. Happy birthday. Love you, Suze." And he followed the others away.

Turning back to the children, the headmaster said, "Well, I know none of you know each other terribly well-- except for you two, of course," he sent a twinkling smile at the twins, "but I've always found eating to be the best ice breaker, so I do hope you're all ready for lunch!"

A chorus of approval answered him and he motioned them around to the larger of the two tables. "Have a seat, everyone!" He and the other two teachers took over one end, Harry placed next to Professor Dumbledore, and he waited while the others sorted themselves into positions. "Dinner should be served just ... about ..." he paused as they found seats, Neville hovering nervously until the rest had chosen before nervously settling into the empty spot between Susan and Blaise.

The moment he settled into his chair, Professor Dumbledore finished, "Now!" and the table was suddenly set with plates and glasses and napkins and pitchers and large platters of pizza. Harry noticed the other children were looking at the pizzas with uncertain eyes, Professors Flitwick and Dumbledore with delight, and Madam Hooch scowling. "Pizza," the headmaster stated. "A favorite among muggles-- I thought it would be a treat for Harry and an interesting opportunity for the rest of us to try something new. I've gotten a variety of toppings, and perhaps Harry can tell us which is best!"

Harry tried not to cringe as eight pairs of eyes focused on him. He dropped his gaze, allowing it to float slightly over the pizzas, and managed to kind of point at one, "The Dursleys were always fond of the one with all the different kinds of meat." He hesitated, then added, "They sometimes got the pepperoni and once or twice the plain. I've never seen one with vegetables like that. Or the one with ham and ... is it pineapple?" he asked hesitantly.

"It is-- Hawaiian they call it," the headmaster said cheerfully. "Who would like to start with what?"

Dead silence. Finally, his well-bred voice sounding just a hint forced, Blaise murmured, "I'm sure it's all delightful. I'll try the ... Hawaiian, since it's near to hand, sir."

"Capital! Simply take hold of the crust and a slice will detach, my boy! No silverware needed for this meal, just put your hand under it and pointy end goes straight to your mouth!"

Blaise followed this injunction, pulling a slice away and turning it in his hand. He paused for only an instant before raising it to his mouth and biting off the end. The other children watched in horrified fascination as he began to chew, face still in its polite mask. His narrow brown brows rose slightly, eyes locked on the slice of pizza before him. He took another, larger, bite and the mask faded as he chewed with more obvious pleasure. Turning to the headmaster, he asked, "Why hasn't anyone in the wizarding world started making this yet?" Not waiting for an answer, he took another large bite, mask gone as he continued with obvious pleasure.

On that cue, the others broke out of their reverie and began taking slices of pizza from the pies nearest them and hesitantly trying them. Not each pizza was a success with each of them, but everyone seemed to like at least one. Even Madam Hooch, when convinced to turn on a slice heavily laden with bacon, ham, beef, pepperoni, and Italian sausage, finally relaxed her glare and ate another three slices of the pie.

After everyone had eaten their first slice, the eating slowed a bit and conversations built up. The children slowly built lines of communication. Harry watched in fascination as Blaise slowly drew

out Neville, encouraging him to talk, their discussion quickly moving to plants, which it seemed Neville had a fascination with. Occasionally Blaise attempted to draw Harry into the conversation, but he answered briefly dropped his eyes and the other boy would nod and turn back to Neville until his next attempt. Parvati and Susan were talking animatedly across Padma about a performance both had seen recently and the actors who had been in it. And Padma, when Harry glanced her way, was watching both the other sets with evident entertainment. Feeling his gaze, she quirked an amused smile at him and he looked hurriedly away.

When Harry's stomach rebelled he asked to be excused. He quietly slipped away to the bathroom, quickly returning to the table, well used to his ritual by now. Returning to his feet, he found that the two conversations had converged onto a single topic -- Quidditch -- and talk was moving across the table more quickly as they finished the meal. Neville was actually offering his opinions of his favorite team and their chances for the year, and Parvati agreeing loudly, though her approval seemed to largely ride on the looks of one of their players, the keeper, whatever that was. Padma continued to watch the others, Blaise to turn his attention on anyone who might be left out of the conversation, and Harry to watch in worried fascination.

At least until Parvati suddenly turned to him and said, "Harry, I know I shouldn't ask and all-- but *could* I see your scar?"

Dead silence as every eye at the table focused on his forehead, though Padma's quickly moved to her sister as she hissed, "Parvati! You don't *ask* someone that!"

"You can't say you're not curious!" Parvati pointed out.

"I-- I'm sorry?" Harry whispered. "What?"

"You know," she said. "The scar. The one *he* gave you!"

How did you get the scar? he almost heard the words. Disobedience not even occurring to him, one hand moved slowly towards his forehead, wondering what new punishment this was. The Dursleys had always encouraged him to hide it, his shame. *My father was drunk and angry. He hit me with a whiskey bottle and it broke and cut*

my forehead. They didn't have a doctor see to it, so it scarred. He pushed his hair back from his face, which he held completely expressionless.

For a long moment they all simply stared at it, even Padma unable to resist the lure. She was the first to break out of the spell, however, and said sharply, "Well, Parvati? You've gawked enough, have you not? Susan, you were saying something about the Hurricanes or something, weren't you?"

"Tornados," Susan corrected automatically, blinking several times quickly, then forcing her eyes back away from Harry. "The Tutshill Tornados, I think they'll do quite well this year."

And, reluctantly, the others followed suit and the conversation resumed, Harry feeling strangely shaken. He darked a sideways glance at the headmaster, who smiled down at him reassuringly and whispered, "They were bound to ask-- don't hold it against you, lad. It *is* rather famous, after all."

"Yes, sir," he whispered, turning his attention back to Blaise, who was heatedly contesting the Tornados chances of beating the Kestrels.

When nobody had lifted a slice of pizza in quite some time, Albus rose and said with a grin, "Well this talk of Quidditch is a nice lead in for a treat Madam Hooch has arranged for you all!"

They turned to him expectantly the conversation dropping off.

"If everyone's finished, that is?" he asked solicitously. At their nods of agreement, he smiled and waved a hand. The table was suddenly empty. "Madam Hooch?"

The woman shoved one thin hand through her short gray hair and glared at them, though the spark of laughter in her eyes confused Harry. As did the way her upper lip twitched slightly as her gaze passed Blaise, who Harry almost thought he heard a muffled laugh from. "I'm Madam Hooch," she stated. "Coach Hooch, to some. I'll answer to either from you at this time. Besides being the flying instructor here at Hogwarts, I'm the coach of the Fledgling team the Hogsmeade Hawks. We don't have enough people to play Quidditch

here and, besides, I'd end up spending more time explaining the rules, since you don't all know them already, then we would flying, and that's no fun for any of us. But I did bring the team brooms and some Spudgers and a Snitch and the rules for dodgeball are a lot simpler," she finished smugly, pulling a small box out of her pocket and setting it onto the table. She flipped open the top and Harry looked in confusion at the match-sized brooms, each with a tiny number printed on its bristles, and the pea-like balls within, each in its own carefully padded slot. The teacher glanced around and laughed. "Blaise, would you demonstrate?"

He grinned and slipped forward, hand moving unhesitatingly to the next to the last broom in the box. He picked it up between two fingers and backed away, making sure that nobody was too close but everyone was watching. "You just set it in the palm of your primary hand-- left for me, since I'm left handed, bristles towards the blade of your hand," he explained, matching action to word. "Then hold it in front of you, fingers pointed away from you, and slowly curl your hand as though-- well, like you were gripping a broom," he said with a grin. As he curled his fingers around the tiny broom in his hand, it shot out at both ends and expanded around, growing until it was nearly as long as he was tall.

"Good," Madam Hooch stated. "When you grow your broom make sure your fingers are pointed away from you and nobody's too close. It won't do you any *real* harm if it hits you in the stomach while it's growing, but it might give you a bit of a bruise and it's best to just do it the right way. Okay? So everyone grab a broom and grow it out. They're all about the same, so you needn't worry about which one you get."

Harry reluctantly moved forward as the others rushed, even Neville appearing eager to give it a try. Hesitantly, he picked one up and moved a bit apart to grow it out. His reached its full size only a moment after everyone else's and they all turned to Madam Hooch for further instruction. She had another, larger, broom in her hand, held at her side, and Harry mimicked her hold on it with his own.

"Hold it in your right hand, close to your side," she said. "But don't mount until I've finished explaining, please. The height limit on the

Fledgeling brooms is just a little higher than the ceiling here, so you can go as high as you want. If you're within ten feet of the ceiling, walls, or floor, you'll be extremely limited as to how fast you can go, but in the open air they'll go up to about sixty miles per hour. Not as fast as a racing broom, of course, but fast enough to feel the speed. You can't get up that much speed inside before hitting a wall, but you'll be able to zip around fairly well, I think. If you're going fast when you enter the ten foot buffer area, cushioning charms will be triggered and the broom automatically slow to a stop. If I feel you're flying unsafely, I'll touch your broom's number on my broom's handle and your broom will land itself and not take off until I release you. If I do this once, your broom will turn orange. A second time, it will turn red. If I am forced to ground you a third time, I'll shrink your broom back down, put it away and you can watch the rest of the games from the floor. Is this understood?"

"Yes, ma'am," Harry said softly, amidst the chorus of agreement.

The flying teacher nodded approval. "Good. For the actual flying, life your feet off the ground and the broom will start flying. Lean the direction you want to go. Lift the nose for up, push it down for down. Sit up straight to slow down or stop, and lean down close to the handle of your broom to speed up. To land, simply go as low as you can and put your feet down. Any questions?"

Neville hesitantly raised one hand and gulped when her yellow eyes stared down at him. "My, um, my magic's not-- it's not always all that strong," he explained.

"And you want to know if you'll tumble to your death if it flickers while you're in the air?" His face went a pasty white and she chuckled. "No fears there. Fledgling brooms don't fly under their riders' power-- they have their own. Even a muggle could fly one, if he knew how. In fact, with these brooms, it's purely physical. A muggle who was good enough could beat the strongest wizard in existence. And if it starts running low on power, it'll land, simple as that. You're safer on a Fledgling than you are walking, really. Even if you jumped off, the broom would follow you down with slowing and cushioning charms the whole way, you probably wouldn't even bruise." She paused, casting a sharp glare around the room and added, "You'd be unlikely

ever to fly again if I've anything to say about it, though-- and that goes for next year when you start school as well as today. So don't! Enough talk! Let's fly! We'll start with follow my leader to get the basics of getting around. Everybody mount your broom-- just swing your right leg over it. That's right. Now just lift your feet up off the ground, and follow me-- Blaise, give a hand to anyone having trouble, would you?"

"Yes, Coach!" he called out quickly, and turned to watch the others as they rose wobbling into the air.

Harry watched, feeling ill, as the others kicked off. He had to, though. To protect his family he had to pretend he wanted to be one of these. And she'd said even a muggle could do it-- it wouldn't be *doing* magic, just using it. But it was still so bad. His hands clenched on the broomstick as he fought to lift his feet from the ground. He wasn't supposed to use magic. And he had to. But it was so hard to convince his feet to lift up.

"It's okay."

The soft voice spun his head around until he was staring at Blaise, who was hovering beside him, looking at him steadily.

"It's okay," the boy reiterated. "I was scared the first time, too."

"You were?" Harry asked blankly. Were there others fighting, this?

"Sure. I think everyone's a little afraid their first flight. It's one thing to be told it will carry you and something else all together to actually trust a little piece of wood and magic with your life. And it must be even worse trusting a broomstick when you were raised by muggles."

Oh. That kind of fear. It hadn't quite occurred to him to be afraid for his physical safety.

"But it will be okay. And then it'll be more than okay-- it'll be fun." Blaise hesitated for a moment, then flew in front of Harry so he was facing him, and said, "Harry, pick up your feet."

Harry didn't even think before obeying the order. He never did. The instant his feet left the ground, the broom lifted a couple inches and then hovered, waiting.

"There, that wasn't so hard!" Blaise called, grinning. "Follow me!" And he spun in place then took off.

So Harry followed, hating himself for loving the smooth motion, speeding up dramatically once they were out of the buffer zone. Blaise glanced back at him with a reassuring smile, then led the way to the back of Madam Hooch's train. She led them in rings and dives, simple and slow until their movement smoothed out and their hands relaxed a bit from their original white-knuckled grips, and then, gradually, faster and more complex. She finished with a huge fast loop they completed almost before the children realized they were going upside down.

They came to a stop and Harry felt an odd warmth and tingling throughout his body. It seemed like his blood was moving more quickly through his veins, heart pounding, lungs heaving, and his hands were damp where they held the broom. All strange, all wrong. And yet it felt so good. He was startled to hear a breathless laugh, and looked around to find the other children's faces flushed and grinning. Blaise looked rather pleased with himself, though less out of breath and excited than the others.

Catching his breath, a bit, Neville gasped, "That was *brilliant!*"

"And nicely done!" Madam Hooch said approvingly. "Do you want more flying now or are you ready for something land bound?"

"More flying!" Neville and Parvati called out eagerly, while Susan nodded agreement and Padma lifted one shoulder with a grin.

Blaise smiled. "You know I'm always up for more air time, Coach."

Golden eyes turned to Harry. "And what does the birthday boy want?"

Harry ducked his head for a bit as all eyes turned once again on him, then glanced up to look at the hopeful faces around him that were slowly falling slightly with disappointment. Everything froze in place

for him. He was doing something wrong. Disappointment was even worse than anger, but what-- the flying. But what was the right answer, he wondered desperately. Surely if he was good he would want nothing else to do with the foul magic? And yet he was to pretend to be one of them and they all wanted to-- at least they said they did. And Harry wasn't used to people lying to him, except for this whole crazy pretense.

"Harry?" Madam Hooch prompted gently.

"Yes," he said quickly. "More flying."

"Are you sure? I'm sure everyone would enjoy the other activities that have been arranged just as much once they get going, whatever they think now."

"I--" he tried to think what she wanted to hear and realized in horror that he was expected to state a personal preference, just as if he deserved to have one of *could* have one that was worth weighing into any decision. As if he was normal. "I'd like to keep flying," he offered hesitantly. "I-- I'd enjoy it."

She studied him for a long moment before nodding sharply. "Dodge ball it is, then," she announced and was forced to pause at the resultant cheer. "Very well, then," she said when she could make herself heard over them. "Here're the rules. You start with three white stripes around the handle of your broom." There narrow white lines instantly circled each broom handle. "I'll release a Spudger --"

"You mean a Bludger?" Parvati asked, looking rather nervous.

"No, a Spudger-- it's like a Bludger but it's spongy rather than iron. It will go after you like a normal Bludger but won't hurt you or knock you off your broom if it hits. But it *will* take one of your stripes. If you lose all your stripes, you sit out for five minutes, and then come back with new white stripes. If everyone gets knocked 'out' at the same time we'll start back up again without waiting, though. Normally you'd sit out for the rest of the game and the last one in the air wins, but I think at this point we'd all just as soon keep in the air, so instead every time you go out you'll get a red stripe and in the end we'll figure out who has the fewest red stripes-- if it's a tie we'll take the one with the

most white stripes. If it's still a tie," -- she grinned around at them-- "then it's a tie." A quiet chuckle from Blaise and a startled laugh from Susan rewarded her.

"We'll stop when you guys are getting tired. Until then, every ten minutes or so I'll release another Spudger you'll have to watch for, so it will keep getting more difficult. If everyone gets out at the same time, we'll drop it back down to one Spudger and start up again. And I'm also going to release a Snitch, one almost as small and fast as an official one. If you catch the Snitch it adds another six white lines for you, so you get six free hits by the Spudger. Release it again and it will disappear for thirty seconds or so before resuming the field so you can't just grab it and release it and grab it again." She paused glancing around. "Everyone got it?"

They didn't sound entirely certain, but she laughed. "You've got enough of it to start playing and the rest you'll get fast. So! Everyone's in the air, so first I'm releasing the Snitch," she stated, doing so. The tiny gold ball hovered in front of her for an instant then moved so fast they could barely see it zipping across the room. "Now the first Spudger," she said, pulling out a large foam ball that was jerking angrily against her hands. The children scattered as the ball was released and started rushing furiously at one of them after another.

Harry moved uncertainly and the first time the Spudger came at him, he did as he always did when something was thrown at him-- he stayed perfectly still, accepting the punishment. It bounced off and one of the lines vanished from his broom. Blaise whooshed up calling out, "Come on, Harry, you can do better than that! Get out of the way next time!" Then was gone again.

Uncertainly, the next time it was coming, he rolled to one side and it swept past him. A cheer from the other children suggested that he'd done the right thing, so he fought his instinct to accept whatever came and joined the others in dodging and diving and rolling to avoid the foam ball. He'd only dodged it a few times before a glint of gold caught his eye across the hall and he spun towards it and closed his hand around the fluttering Snitch.

"Go, Harry!" Blaise shouted, poise forgotten in excitement. "Coach, has anyone ever caught it that fast?"

"Not... not in a long time," she answered slowly. "Impressive catch, Harry-- watch out!" she added as the Spudger veered suddenly towards the boy. He opened his hand, releasing the Snitch, and dove under the larger ball, making it stop in confusion and then barrel off after somebody else. The children cheered, except for Padma who was busy dodging since it had turned on her. They cheered her narrow escape as well, and she flashed an unexpected smile back at them.

The second Spudger was released and they began succeeding in their attacks more frequently as the children continued to dodge and duck. Harry noticed the Snitch almost on the ceiling and moved to catch it again, blinking in surprise as he suddenly slowed to a crawl as he entered the buffer zone. The two Spudgers hit him one after another as he lost his maneuverability, but he caught the winged ball again and then moved to get out of the slow area.

Soon he had forgotten, as much as he was capable of forgetting, that he was wearing magical clothes, playing a magical game, on a magical broom, and amongst magical children, and he was completely focused on dodging, diving, twirling, looping, and searching the air for the little flash of gold that won him more applause and, almost more importantly, more air time. Because somewhere, deep in the back of his mind, Harry realized that if he stopped, even for five minutes, he'd have to admit just how bad he was being and he wouldn't be able to start again. But for now, the ever-multiplying Spudgers zoomed past and he managed, with more and more frequency, to avoid them as they tried to reach him. Time after time he heard a faint hum or saw that brief flash that told him where the Snitch was and once he was locked onto it, it only escaped a couple times.

He only noticed the other children when they were near enough to change how he avoided the Spudgers, how he raced for the Snitch, and then only as obstacles. He gained a perfect sense of where the buffer zone was, how fast he could move in which part of it, how quickly the Spudgers would come after him when he entered it, how

much time he had to get the Snitch and get out, when it was there, and what the best way to get through it was.

Harry didn't notice how badly he was trembling with fatigue until he reached for the snitch and didn't have the strength to close his hand around it. He stared in surprise at his hand, and then, just as he realized that he had forgotten to look for the Spudgers, a whistle blew loudly, he heard several thumps as the balls fell from the air, and he lost control of his broom. It slowly lowered itself to the ground. He stared around in blank shock as the other kids, all holding their brooms rather than riding them, rushed forward, shouting, and Madam Hooch pushed through them. He felt himself begin to cringe and forced himself to wait passively for whatever punishment they were giving.

"Well done, lad!" the coach shouted, delighted. He looked up, shocked, and found her grinning fiercely and moving down to place one hand on his broom. "May I?"

"Err. Yes-- sorry," he said, swinging his leg over and dismounting, then staring at his left hand in disbelief as it refused to release its grip on the handle. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "I-- I can't--"

"Can't let go? I should have stopped you sooner, but-- Merlin!" she murmured. She took his hand with her hers, and heavily callused fingers gently straightened his fingers. Harry bit back a whimper of pain before they were aware of it, but she still shook her head in disbelief. "I should have stopped you sooner and you-- you should have said something!" she said, disapproval coloring her voice although the pride remained stronger.

"Sorry, ma'am," he whispered, staring at his hand where it had blistered and the blisters had popped all along his grip on the broom.

"Well I'm not," she stated. "Not completely anyway," she admitted with a grin. "Count up the stripes, Blaise, would you, while I fix up our young Quidditch star's hand?"

"Glad to!" he announced taking the broom with reverent hands and beginning to count the white lines around it.

Madam Hooch pulled out her wand and cast a quick charm. "That one's to make sure there're no splinters in there. Shouldn't be with these brooms, they're kept in excellent shape, but better safe than sorry. And now to actually fix it." Another charm was cast and Harry's hand trembled as it began to itch furiously. He swallowed hard as he watched the skin heal up over it. "And last of all," she said, satisfied with her work, "*scourgify*." The blood and dirt vanished. "To get rid of the blood. Releasing Harry's hand, she set one strong hand on his shoulder as she turned to Blaise. "Well, what have we got?"

"Thirty-two stripes!" he announced, voice stunned. "The most I've ever seen anyone win is twenty-five."

"Charlie Weasley got thirty-seven in his day," she commented slowly. "But he'd been practicing for years and was fighting for it. He wanted that record. For a first try? Mr. Potter, whichever House you get sorted into they're going to do anything you want for them if you agree to play on their Quidditch team, I can promise you that."

Harry hung his head and said nothing.

"But I shouldn't have let you exhaust yourself so completely. But I was so curious how long you could go on! All ten of my Spudgers are out and I would have added another if I'd had one a good five minutes before your strength gave out! Everyone but Blaise had given up for a while, and he finally stopped just to watch you better! Good show, Harry, very good show indeed!"

"Thank you, ma'am," he said uncertainly.

She laughed. "Thank *you*. Best show I've seen in years. But I think it's time to put the brooms away." The brooms were quickly shrunk down and returned to their boxes. Blaise had put his away immediately and after counting the rings on Harry's broom had put it away and gone off to collect all the balls, shrinking them as he got them, so when the last of the brooms had fallen in he was ready to drop a handful of tiny Spudgers in as well. The Snitch he gave to Madam Hooch, who tucked it away in her pocket.

Albus reappeared in the doorway as they finished up. "Ah, I see that brooms have taken up most of the afternoon, after all! Other activities

shall have to wait for some other day-- but there is always time for cake and presents, is there not?"

With shouts of excited agreement, the children rushed to the table, Harry lagging nervously behind. He dropped reluctantly into his seat and watched as a huge cake was levitated into the room and down onto the table. It was frosted in red and yellow and blue bright enough that Harry was almost positive it shouldn't be edible, with a large red and yellow dragon on a blue background. The dragon strutted in place and turned occasionally to grin toothily at the children or shoot a jet of orange and gold flame out across the cake. Harry trembled at his expression of comical confusion when a slice was cut including one of his legs, and took only a very small piece when the headmaster asked him how much he wanted. For once the man didn't ask him to take more. The other children were all given pieces as well, and Harry began to eat this as willingly as he could, trying to decide whether or not he liked the incredibly sweet, sugary icing before realizing in dismay that he was thinking about whether he *liked* something. Uncle Vernon, when he got home, was going to be so mad at him. This whole day he'd...

The children devoured their cake and then fetched their presents from the smaller table and waited for the headmaster's permission to give them to Harry. Which he granted, making a game of the order the gifts are given by having Harry pick a number and then the children guess. Whoever chose the closest number to Harry's handed him the next gift. And then stopped guessing for future rounds, of course. Harry nervously picked his numbers, sure that there was some hidden meaning he was missing, sure that he was doing something wrong. Something even more than accepting the brightly wrapped packages into his hands and carefully removing their wrapping paper. He ripped the paper a few times because his hands were still trembling from the flying. Each time, he paused, eyes down, waiting for the blow. Each time, no blow came and he resumed wrapping when the others demanded he do so.

Padma chose the first right number and handed him a solid feeling rectangular package which proved to contain a book entitled *A Meeting of Worlds*.

"It's all about muggles in the wizarding world and wizards in the muggle world," she explained. "Culture shock and things like that. I know you're not really a muggle-born, but in some ways you almost are, and I thought maybe it would help."

He thanked her shyly, then looked uncertainly at the headmaster who grinned at him. "Just set it down on the table, Harry, and go on to the next. You can take a look at it later on."

"Yes, sir," he agreed, setting the book gently down and reluctantly choosing another number and whispering it to the headmaster.

Susan Bones, who was next, gave him a package in bright blue foil. When he removed the tape and unfolded the paper, there was red foil underneath. He repeated the procedure and found a layer of purple foil. Then green. The children began to giggle when he uncovered a layer of pink foil, and, when he carefully uncovered silver, Neville offered hesitantly, "I got a package wrapped in that a couple years ago. You can only get it off if you rip a hole all the way in and tear it off. I must have gone through about twenty layers before Great Uncle Algie told me," he added. Harry swallowed, then obeyed, ripping the paper off and uncovering a box containing several smaller boxes each with a clear cover through which he could see a frog made of chocolate.

Susan grinned. "I figured chocolate's always a fair bet," she offered.

"Me next, me next!" Parvati pleaded, but Albus just grinned and shook his head.

"Guess the number, then!"

She tried but, instead, Neville was the closest that round, indeed picking four, which was dead on, and passed over an awkwardly shaped package with a murmured, "Um. Be just a little careful opening it."

Obediently, Harry took the utmost care removing the paper, and found within a small plant in a ceramic pot.

"It's Witch's Wode," Neville said nervously. "It got named that because potions masters find it kind of maddening. It has really, really beautiful flowers and apparently they're good in a lot of potions, but it will only flower for someone who loves the plant, not someone who just wants to use it. This one's grown a bit from one of the seedlings I got from mine. It's really easy to keep alive, just make sure you check the soil every few days to see if it's moist, and if it seems dry add a bit of water. And if you can keep it in the sun, that's best, but any light will really do. It'll live through most anything, really. Even if you forget all about it. But it will only flower if you love it." He blushed and added, "You don't have to, of course. But-- well, I thought you might like it," he finished uncertainly.

"Thank you, Neville," Harry said slowly, looking down at the plant, wondering if it was possible for him to love something magical. Wondering what his uncle would say if he did. "I'll take good care of it," he offered.

The boy nodded and sat back.

Parvati did pick best next, and smiled widely as she handed over slim package.

He opened it and found within some sort of magazine with a ticket on top. When he looked more closely he found that the ticket was a two-galleon gift certificate to Zonko's Joke Shop, and the magazine was a mail order catalog for the same. "Mum said you don't actually go outside-- yet, at least," she explained, looking like she didn't really understand but wasn't about to ask. "But all the boys love Zonko's and I thought you'd have fun picking stuff out and getting it."

And, lastly, Blaise gave him a package small enough to fit easily in the palm of his hand. He opened it to find a Golden Snitch much like the one he'd been chasing earlier.

"It's not exactly like the real ones-- it behaves mostly the same but once you set it to you, it'll come back when you snap your fingers-- even if it's not really close enough to hear you. And if you're not on a broom it won't go more than six feet in the air," he explained. "I guess you don't really need one to practice with, given how good you

already are at chasing them-- but I thought at the time you might like it."

Harry nodded solemnly. "Thank you very much. And I'm sure with practice I'd improve."

Blaise grinned and said, "Then I sure hope you get sorted into the same house as me once we get into school!"

The others were loudly agreeing when the door at the end of the great hall opened and all five adults entered. There was some confusion as the kids said their rushed farewells and Harry tried to be polite and pretend to be a part of them while also trying not to do too much his uncle would be mad at. It was a difficult balance and one that he knew he failed rather miserably. But, at long last, they were all gone and he turned uncertainly to the headmaster, who was smiling cheerfully down at him.

"Well? Did you have fun?"

"Yes, sir," he said, softly, horrified by the knowledge that it was partly true. "Thank you, sir."

"Not at all, not at all. One only turns ten once, after all, and a little party was the least I could do! But for now, are you ready to meet the Sorting Hat?"

Harry rejected the need to swallow convulsively, and nodded. "Yes, sir," he agreed.

"Excellent," the headmaster approved. "We shall meet the others in my office for the Sorting, then. Only the Heads of House shall witness the proceedings. If all goes well and a house is chosen, you'll don the hat again with the other first years, and everyone else will find out then," he explained gesturing for Harry to join him as he moved out of the Great Hall and started towards his office.

Harry followed obediently through the halls, the path almost familiar to him now. He didn't look at the gargoyle as they passed it, and tried not to notice the movement of the staircase spiraling them up to the office door. Inside, they found the heads of house already present. Professor Sprout was seated comfortably in a large chair, head tilted slightly back against its back, and Professor Flitwick perched in another. The potions master was standing in the darkest corner of the office with a sneer on his face, and Professor McGonagall was behind a tall stool, holding a battered old hat in her hands.

She offered a thin smile as the pair entered, and pointed at the stool. "Have a seat, Mr. Potter."

Obediently he climbed up onto the stool and waited uncertainly. The hat was set on his head, and Professor McGonagall stepped back a couple paces so nobody was too close. The hat drooped down, over Harry's eyes, and he waited nervously for whatever was to happen next.

The voice was so quiet he wouldn't have heard it had it not been practically in his ear, ears actually. Even with his sharp hearing, he was certain he couldn't have caught a single syllable from even a couple feet away. Yet he had no difficulty understanding it.

"So, this is Harry Potter," it murmured cheerfully. "I've been looking forward to meeting you."

Belatedly he realized that the hat itself was speaking to him, and he began to tremble very slightly.

"Odd," it commented, cheer giving way to thoughtfulness. "Why would you fear me?"

Harry clenched his eyes and tried to ignore the voice. Images and memories that answered the question flashed through his mind. It wasn't until the hat's whispered, "Dear Merlin," in his ears that he realized that he was neither directing the thoughts, nor the only witness to them. Frantically he tried to block out the thing in his mind, to alter the directions of his mind's flow, but he could do nothing.

Desperate, he moved to raise his hands to tear it from his head, but a snapped, "Harry!" made him pause. The voice was still speaking in a whisper but in a tone that always froze him instantly, aware that he was very close to a serious transgression.

"You and I *will* discuss this," the hat stated. "If you remove me, it means that we must discuss it loudly enough for the others to hear. Would you like them to know?"

Reluctantly, his hands fell to his sides, still tense.

"Good boy. Sort you! Merlin," the hat murmured in disgust. "We'll be lucky if we can sort you in a year's time, much less now. Oh, you've qualities for the houses. Loyalty strong enough to bind hearts, but twisted into bridle and bit. A great deal of intelligence, but warped, warped. As for courage? The courage it takes just for you to sit here in front of wizards and witches in a magical school, trying your hardest to protect those you care about, surrounded by everything you've been taught to fear. Oh, you've courage. But so bound up I can scarce bear to see it. Ambition you're lacking. Slytherin wouldn't suit you at all, not as you stand. But then, none would work as you stand. Every excellent quality in you has been twisted and stunted. Dear Merlin, I have seen similar cases, but none so bad. None nearly so bad. We haven't time to discuss this, presently, not without causing a great deal of suspicion and curiosity. So, as you'd prefer to keep this between the two of us, for as long as that is possible, we shall have to meet at some other time. And place. The headmaster's office is not a good place in which to keep secrets from the headmaster. At least, not this kind of secret. Let's see..."

Harry clenched his jaw as again memories began flashing through his mind, this time more recent memories of his week of exploration.

A low whistle. "You *have* been busy, haven't you? Hogwarts has been trying to make you comfortable. Not everyone finds rooms and corridors in the same places every day, you know." The hat sighed at Harry's shudder in response. "Well. After dinner I believe you shall be left to your own devices, most often, but where--" He paused, reviewing the first conversation between Dumbledore and Snape that Harry had overheard. "Ah. This is the last day of Severus's week, I see, which means you'll be getting a new room. Knowing the headmaster as I do, I believe that room shall be private and I should have no difficulty finding out where it is. I'd prefer someplace more secure, but for now it shall have to do. You may expect to see me this evening shortly after you're left to yourself, Harry. If you try to avoid this meeting, I will share what I have seen with the headmaster. And one thing the man who dares call himself your family said is very true indeed -- if the headmaster knows what they have done to you, he will be *extremely* angry. In a way that your ... family is not likely to survive. So don't forget. No -- don't speak. No need to make them wonder more than they already are by the length of our conversation. I'll see you tonight."

The voice rose, suddenly, to a normal tone. "Maybe later."

A snort from without was muffled slightly by the hat before it reached Harry, but he recognized it as the potions master's.

"A long consultation for such an anticlimactic decision," Professor Dumbledore remarked, gently chiding.

"I do hope, Albus, that you're not trying to tell me how to sort students?" the hat asked softly enough that Harry paled a shade, still hidden beneath it. "Especially so close to the start of the year."

"No, no, of course not!" the old man said quickly, and Harry's vision returned as the hat was plucked from his head. The headmaster, looking a bit flustered, gestured for Harry to rise, sent the stool to an empty corner of his office, and set the hat carefully down atop it. Professor Snape smirked, and even Professor McGonagall had a hint

of an amused twist to her lips. "Is there anything I should be aware of?" the headmaster asked hesitantly.

"A great deal, I should think," the hat replied tartly. "You are the headmaster of Hogwarts, are you not? Or are you asking me if there is information about a prospective student that I have uncovered that you should be aware of, but that I did not offer to share with you, due, no doubt, to a lack of insight on my part?"

The headmaster actually shuffled his feet uncomfortably, at which the potions master looked delighted and Madam Sprout lifted one hand to cover her mouth.

Professor Flitwick, who had glanced out the window, looked at his colleagues' expressions in surprise, and cocked his head inquisitively at the Hufflepuff Head of House, who lowered her hand to murmur, "Later."

"Of course not," the old man muttered. "So. Our easiest option would appear to be out, and yet we can't let you go entirely without schooling, my boy," he stated, voice firming as he turned towards Harry. "First off, have *you* any ideas?"

"No, sir."

"There's nothing that you would specifically like to do?"

He hesitated.

"Ah! There is something, then?"

"I just want to go home, sir," he admitted, relieved to realize that it was one thing he *could* want without it being bad.

The headmaster looked surprised. "I hadn't realized you were so unhappy here, Harry. You haven't mentioned anything."

Not knowing what response was expected, Harry offered the always appropriate, "Sorry, sir." His eyes flickered for a moment to the side at the potions master's snort, but then returned to the headmaster.

"Sorry? There's nothing for you to be sorry for, Harry," Dumbledore told him, eyes twinkling. "Indeed, I'm sorry that I can't allow you to go home if you miss it so much. What do you miss?" he asked, curiously.

"My family," he replied, not showing his discomfort at the headmaster's near-apology. He did miss them. Missed not having to wonder if he was being good or bad. Missed knowing that they loved him and were trying to help him stop being bad. Missed, rather than having to weigh his every answer, granting the instant honesty that they had taught him. He missed the safety of having everyone who spoke to him openly acknowledging his lack of worth. He was so sick of hiding.

"I see," Dumbledore murmured. "That is understandable. You were happy with them, then? There were some concerns, years ago, that they would ... not care for you properly."

"They love me," he said simply.

"Then I am very glad indeed of that. I'm sure your parents would be very relieved to know it."

Harry remained perfectly still, not allowing any outward reaction to the words, while, inside, he began repeating, *James Potter. Bully. Wizard. Alcoholic. Freak.*

"Did they tell you about your parents, Harry?"

"Yes, sir." *Lily Evans Potter. Spoiled brat. Whore. Witch. Freak.*

"They were such a devoted couple. And they loved you so very much."

I was a disappointment and an inconvenience. Strange how words to the contrary hurt. Someone telling him his old dream was true, that his parents had wanted him, had loved him, had not been bad. But believing lies brought pain. It was always best to be honest.

The headmaster sighed when he didn't answer. "Well, I believe I shall come up with a schedule for you to attend some classes with first years and receive tutoring from the teachers during their free periods.

And you will have some time to yourself every day, of course. Basic maths, history, reading, and writing are the basis of any good education. And Latin, I think, a language most useful for any wizard-to-be. Some basic Potions, I think--"

"What?" The potions master's exclamation was almost a yelp.

"It doesn't require a wand, Severus," the headmaster pointed out, eyes twinkling. "And the earlier one begins learning good brewing techniques the better."

"Astronomy doesn't require a wand! Care of Magical Creatures! Divination! Arithmancy! Ancient runes! Muggle studies! Herbology!"

"I should be quite pleased to see him for a bit of Herbology," Professor Sprout interjected with a warm smile at Harry.

"Herbology is an excellent thought," Professor Dumbledore agreed cheerfully. "But I don't think young Harry is quite ready to face the night sky for Astronomy yet -- nor the daytime one for Care of Magical Creatures. Arithmancy and Ancient Runes are both rather high level classes, and I think without further magical education both would be quite hopeless. I hardly think he needs Muggle Studies. And would you really consign him to Sybil's care for Divination, Severus?"

The potions master scowled sourly. "Why you keep that woman--"

"Is quite beyond you, yes. You've mentioned that before," he twinkled back.

"Am I the only one to be saddled with him, then?"

"Well, Pomona has already volunteered. I think some Defense Against the Dark Arts is also called for," the headmaster replied thoughtfully. "I fear he'll need it all too soon, and with our luck in teachers recently, taking it more than once with the first years won't cause any repetition."

Professor Snape smirked.

"But I do believe that shall do for now. Minerva, could you help Harry with reading and writing? And Filius, I should be grateful if you would undertake teaching him Latin."

The two murmured agreement and he flashed them grateful smiles before continuing, "I shall cover history--"

"Not Binns?" his deputy asked with a hint of a smile.

"Not before necessary, I think. And I shall ask you to cover maths, Severus."

"Surely Vector--"

"Is completely unable to comprehend how anyone cannot be instinctively aware of anything short of advanced calculus and is therefore totally incapable of teaching anything more basic than that."

"But why--"

"My dear Severus, did you truly think I didn't know you tutored the Slytherins who took Arithmancy? Did you think I took it as mere luck that Slytherins averaged considerably higher in that class than any other house? Not that Vector isn't an excellent teacher for students with strong mathematical bases, but it would do neither of them any good to put Harry with him now."

"But--"

"Good! I knew I could count on you! I shall simply write up a schedule and make sure there are no conflicts. I'll provide it to you all as soon as I can, and the last week before school starts, Harry, if we're satisfied that you know your way about the castle fairly well, I'll have you go through that schedule as though classes had begun. Just to familiarize yourself with the teachers, the timetable, and what is expected of you. Okay?"

Harry blinked at his abrupt inclusion in the conversation, but immediately answered, "Yes, sir."

"Then for now, let's return to the throng that has no doubt assembled in the great hall to complete the celebration of your birthday, shall we?"

As he didn't seem to expect an answer, Harry obediently moved ahead of the waving hand and preceded the headmaster out of the room, the other Heads of House following along with more or less enthusiasm. Professor Flitwick was practically skipping down the hall, while Professor Snape strode along silently. Harry didn't look back, but he felt he could feel a glare burning into his shoulders. And those shoulders were remarkably difficult to keep level and straight. They seemed far heavier than usual, and the desire to let them curl in and droop was almost irresistible. His eyes, too, seemed impossibly heavy. It took an effort of will to keep them wide and alert. He couldn't remember ever having been quite so exhausted before.

He hardly noticed the gathered teachers as he sank, with far less care than usual for the upholstery, into the chair he was led to. Then, he barely fought back a cringe as the headmaster loomed over him, fatigue almost breaking through his trained decorum. He looked up, concerned, at the murmur of startled voices that answered the headmaster's announcement that he had not been placed into a house early, but they calmed quickly. He waited uncertainly, wondering if they were, at last, going to begin punishing him again. Instead, a long slender package was placed into his hands, wrapped in bright paper.

"From Professors McGonagall, Flitwick, and myself," the headmaster announced cheerfully.

Harry removed the paper carefully, and stared with empty eyes at the slender rod within.

"It's not a real wand," Professor Flitwick hastened to explain, hands rubbing together excitedly as he spoke. "You can't get one until you're eleven, you know. We might have gotten special permission if you'd placed in a house, but, for now, I hope this will do. It's a training wand, you see. It doesn't use your magic, but responds to your spoken commands and the way you move it by giving an illusion of the spell you cast. So you can practice getting intonation and gesture

just right and be well ahead of the game once you begin classes next year!"

"It recognizes quite a wide range of spells," Professor McGonagall added in, a rare smile touching her thin lips. "The full charms and transfiguration curriculum up through third year and a few others. And it's has quite a sophisticated learning charm on it increase those it recognizes and imitates."

Harry gave himself a moment to gather himself, then managed to nod. "My thanks to you, sirs, ma'am."

"I hope you will get a good deal of fun, as well as learning, out of it, Harry," the headmaster said cheerily.

"Thank you, sir," he repeated. "I-- I'm sure I will."

A loud squawk jerked his head up, eyes, wide, and the headmaster chuckled. "It seems that your gift wishes to be given next, Hagrid."

The giant blushed, and stepped forward, hands behind his back. Harry swallowed hard and managed not to shrink back into the chair, away from the huge man. He couldn't help imagining how a blow from one of those huge hands would feel, throwing him across the room...

"Sorry," the big man boomed. "Got summat for yeh, Harry, didn't mean ta change th' order though."

"There's no order, Hagrid," the headmaster replied cheerfully. "And your gift sounds a touch impatient," he added, as a twitter emanated from behind the giant.

"So tis! 'Ere now, Harry, it isn't wrapped -- couldn' think o' a way to do't. But a boy oughter have a pet," he stated, drawing a large cage from behind his back with incongruous grace, the cage not even trembling at the motion.

Large yellow eyes stared out of a white, feathered face, then blinked. Green eyes blinked back, and some of the teachers smiled.

"Do yeh like 'er?" Hagrid asked nervously.

Harry stared at the bird wondering what they could possibly expect of him. Finally, he managed, "Y-- Yes, sir. Very much."

"What shall you call her, Harry?" Professor Sprout asked warmly.

"Call her?" he repeated blankly.

"Well, yes. Most pets have names. You could name her after just about anything. Something to let her know when you're talking to her."

"I-- I don't know," he whispered. He had no right to name something! What if he chose wrong? What if he shouldn't choose at all? How could he be trusted to do such a task?

"You can always name her after a historical personage," Madam Pomfrey suggested when the silence lengthened.

"Ah yes," the potions master murmured. "If she shares her master's tendency of self-starvation, Hedwig might be appropriate, for example."

"The Lady Hedwig was a great and noble witch!" Madam Sprout stated, sending him a dark look. "Perhaps it was not altogether wise in her that she thought fasting would increase her powers, but she did a great deal of good in her life. And she was very powerful, after all, so perhaps there was something in it, at that."

Professor Snape sneered down at his colleague. Harry, eyes slightly unfocused with exhaustion, failed to see that the professor was about to speak and interrupted with a careful, "Thank you very much for the suggestion, sir. I'll use that."

Everyone stared at him for a moment, the potions master near to sputtering. Afraid that he'd misstepped, the boy added, nervously, "If you don't mind, sir?"

"Name the bird whatever you please! It certainly has nothing to do with me!" he snapped back, seeming suddenly angry again.

Harry lowered his gaze, quickly, but nodded. "Thank you, sir," he repeated.

Madam Sprout gave a sudden burst of merry laughter. "Foiled, Severus! That will teach you to come the Grinch."

"The *what?*" he demanded. "As if I should ever--"

"No, no, of course not, dear boy," Dumbledore interjected, eyes twinkling. "So. An owl from Hagrid and a name from Professor Snape -- who's next, then?"

"I didn't give--"

"Now, now, my boy. Your turn is done -- unless you've another gift for Harry?" he interrupted himself.

"Of course I don't! I have no reason to be giving presents to future students!"

"Of course not," the headmaster soothed. "The name was already quite thoughtful of you. I daresay Harry shall be as grateful for that as for anything he receives."

"Yes, sir," Harry assured them both.

"But, as I say, you've had your turn," Professor Dumbledore continued serenely over his potions master's indignant denials of having given a gift. "Anyone else?"

"My gift is not something I could bring in," Professor Sprout stated, stepping forward with a warm smile. "I thought you might, perhaps, like a place of your own in one of the greenhouses, Harry. You can grow anything you like there -- muggle or magical. I'd be glad to help you with it."

"Thank you, ma'am," he said, uncertainly.

"No need. I hope you shall enjoy it. I can't imagine growing up without having anything growing around me. It may not sound like much now, but if you don't enjoy it once you begin, you needn't keep working the

section to please me, you know," she assured him. "I do hope you'll enjoy it, though."

"I'm sure I will, ma'am," he agreed, feeling his shoulders sink forward and hurriedly lifting them back to straight.

"Well *my* gift you can unwrap," Madam Hooch said with a grin, stepping forward and thrusting a small box into Harry's hand.

Obediently, he removed the paper and found a small box within. Opening it, he found a tiny broom, just like the one he had held earlier in the day, until it had grown to full size. He turned questioningly towards the woman, who was grinning widely, her yellow eyes almost glowing with pleasure as she nodded.

"Yup," she acknowledged. "It's a Fledgling. You'll have to get permission from the headmaster to fly it inside, mind. And gradually we'll work at getting you flying outside."

"Yes, ma'am," he agreed reluctantly, turning his eyes back to the broom, horrified at how tempted he felt. He wanted to fly it. He couldn't *let* himself want it. But it was so hard not to....

Satisfied, she faded back to allow the next person forward. Harry felt himself slumping and forcefully straightened again. The gifts continued, mostly candy and books and a couple knickknacks. Professor Trelawney gave him a large, faceted crystal, murmuring sorrowfully that she had little hope that it would save him from the dark fate she saw stalking him, but that it would, perhaps, protect him a little. Some of them just wished him a happy birthday, with greater or lesser interest, and gave him nothing, for which he was grateful. Filch didn't offer any gifts. Nor did Professor Mungrove, nor Professor Vector. The others gave him small tokens. Finally, the last was revealed to be a large sack of owl feed and a smaller box of owl treats from Professor Kettleburn, and the parade of gifts stopped. Harry felt slightly dazed, as though there was something separating him from the rest of the world. It was difficult to even keep his eyes open, much less sit up straight, and it was growing increasingly difficult to remember why it was so important to do so. Someone moved quickly in front of him, and he jerked unconsciously to avoid a blow, then straightened, eyes widening as he realized suddenly what

he'd done. Reality rushed back into his fogged mind, and he straightened his shoulders and back, opened his eyes a little more widely, and waited.

"Well, one more gift, Harry, and for that we must go for a bit of a walk," the headmaster informed him, grinning.

"Yes, sir," he said softly, rising to his feet, startled when he swayed slightly. A surprisingly firm hand steadied him.

"Okay, my boy?" the headmaster asked, concerned.

"Yes, sir," he said softly. "Sorry, sir."

"Nothing to be sorry for. I daresay you're exhausted after all the flying this afternoon."

Harry hesitated, weighing the words. He had never felt like this before. But the Dursleys had sometimes said they were exhausted when they came in, and had then collapsed onto couches or chairs or beds, falling asleep or dropping into stupors watching the telly. The idea of collapsing felt incredibly tempting. He'd never felt remotely like this before. "Yes, sir," he answered, still not entirely sure if that was exactly what he was feeling, but it seemed close enough and was easier than trying to figure out something else.

"Well, just a little longer and you can go to bed. Let me take some of these for you," he added. With a wave of his wand, Harry's gifts gathered into a small pile and began to float. "Now then, this way, if you please." He gestured towards the door and glanced back at the rest of the staff. "No need to wait for me before eating. I know some of you had things you were eager to get to this evening. I do appreciate everyone attending."

"Thank you," Harry added softly, then headed out the door, almost stumbling on a slightly uneven stone.

The headmaster walked at his side, leading him up stairs and through halls. They stopped in a small corridor not far from his office in front of a painting of a young child with blond hair and blue robes who was carefully stacking a set of blocks. The boy looked up with serious

gray eyes as they reached him, then smiled at Harry. "Are you going to get my room?" he asked.

Harry looked uncertainly from the portrait to the professor, who nodded reassuringly, then turned to the boy in the picture. "Good evening, Augustus. Yes, indeed, this is Harry Potter who shall have your room this year. Do you mind?"

"No, I've been awful lonely," he said. "I'd like to have a friend staying in my room. It's nice to meet you, Harry."

"Thank you," he managed. "You too." "Now, Augustus, you and Harry shall work out a password to get in, between you. For now, you can simply open on sight, but once the students come back I'd prefer you add a bit more security. You know we have a few people who would take it as a personal challenge to sneak into Harry's room."

The gray eyes lit suddenly and the boy in the painting grinned. "It'll be fun stopping them! We can talk about it in the morning, maybe. Harry looks awful tired."

The headmaster glanced down and nodded agreement. "That he does. Open, if you will, and let's show Harry his new room."

The boy nodded solemnly and the painting swung open, a round hole too small for most adults to pass through without ducking showing behind him. The headmaster crouched to move through it, and Harry stepped through after him and looked around. The room was beautiful. It was about the same size as his room off the potions master's quarters, but seemed larger because the furnishings were a bit smaller, as though made for a child. The walls were paneled in some warm golden wood, the floor matching, and one large window in the far wall looked out over the grounds and lake. It was set deep in the wall and a broad seat was carved, softened by green cushions and with a couple of pillows on one end. A low bookcase stood empty to either side of the window-seat, their tops about as high as the headmaster's waist. A wooden desk with a comfortable-looking chair drawn under it was set to the right, opposite a wooden bed carved with vines and leaves. The bed had heavy, emerald curtains and a thick matching comforter. A patchwork quilt in bright colors was folded at the foot of it. On the near side of the bed, a door was placed

beside its head, with a wardrobe placed kitty-corner to it. A thick sheepskin rug of dark gray lay beside the bed, cushioning the floor from bed to wardrobe and door.

"No fireplace, I'm afraid," Professor Dumbledore said apologetically. "The door leads to a bathing room-- bath tub, sink and toilet, no shower. But I hope you'll be comfortable."

With a wave of his wand, the headmaster sent Harry's gifts about the room. Books ordered themselves on the shelves while candy and knickknacks landed lightly atop the desk. The plant that Neville had given him placed itself neatly on top of one of the bookshelves, where light would reach it easily. The miniature broom and toy snitch set atop the other one. A bird perch expanded into shape on the far side of the bed, and the professor opened the cage to allow Hedwig to fly out of it and over to the perch. The cage itself he shrank and sent to rest on a shelf in the wardrobe. When everything was placed to his satisfaction, Professor Dumbledore nodded and looked down at Harry, a hint of anxiety in his eyes. "We do want you to be happy here, Harry."

"Y-- Yes, sir," he murmured nervously. "Thank you, sir."

"I *am* sorry that I didn't realize sooner how home sick you were. Is there anything I can do to make it easier for you?"

"No, sir," he answered quickly. He shouldn't have said anything before. But it had seemed possible that they would let him go home, that this whole terrible test of his resolve could come to an end. "Thank you, sir."

"You're most welcome, my boy. If there's anything you need or if you're ever feeling lonely and wish to talk, you're quite welcome to come speak to me. And Augustus, your door guard, will come to this side of the door if you call his name, although he'll stay out unless you call him. The paintings are quite polite that way. He'll only enter if you call him or if he is asked to give you a message. That somebody wishes to come in, for example. Augustus has been lonely, lately, since none of the professors have children to talk to and even when the students are here, very few of them make time to talk to the portraits. There are the other portraits, of course, but most of them

are of adults you know. I'm sure he'd be grateful if you chatted with him a bit now and then."

"Yes, sir."

"Very good, then. You do look ready to fall over -- to bed with you, my boy, and I'll see you at breakfast in the morning." He pointed to a small clock on the table beside the bed. "Just tell the clock what time you'd like to wake up, and an alarm will be set. And I'll expect you at breakfast, which shall continue to be at eight-thirty, as it has been. I'll leave the lights under your control for now," he added. "Say 'lumos' to turn them on and 'nox' to turn them off. If we find you haven't the maturity to get enough sleep on your own, and stay up too much of the night and are heavy-eyed and listless with fatigue, I shall have to set an override to them."

"Yes, sir," he agreed.

At a hint of a sigh, he dared a nervous glance up at the man. Blue eyes were studying him, eyebrows drawn slightly together. "Are you okay, Harry?"

"Yes, sir."

"I don't suppose you'd care to tell me what you discussed with the sorting hat?" The boy hesitated a moment and, before he answered, a wrinkled hand waved. "No, never mind. Tell me if you wish to, at any time, but don't feel pressured, my boy. For now, unless there's anything else you need, I'll wish you goodnight."

"Yes, sir," he said softly. "I mean, no, sir. I don't need anything." A soft smile answered him. "Very well, then, Harry. I'll leave you for the night. Your belongings have been transferred into the chest at the foot of the bed.

"Thank you, sir."

"Certainly. Good night, my boy."

"Good night, sir."

Harry watched him until the door closed behind the man, then dared one nearly frantic glance about the room before sliding down to his knees, chin dropping to his chest in exhaustion. He felt tears build in his eyes, and frantically blinked them back. He couldn't cry. He had no right to cry. There was no closet, he realized in dismay. And the wardrobe was small enough that he would barely be able to curl up in, knees to chest. Should he? Or was there somewhere else he ought to sleep? He desperately wanted to go into it and see if it would be possible to sleep there, but he knew if he did he'd fall instantly asleep, and he couldn't go to sleep yet. The Hat had said it was coming tonight and he didn't dare be asleep when it arrived. It might take that as not being here and tell, as it had threatened.

His breath caught in his chest and he felt a lump forming in his throat. He was so tired and confused. His head turned without him wishing it to, and he found his eyes landing on the Snitch and the box holding the miniature broom. Uncle Vernon was going to be so disappointed in him. He'd had to ride it, of course. They'd told him to and he was to act as much like them as he could. But he'd enjoyed it. More than enjoyed it. And that, surely, was unforgivable. It could only mark him as having fallen even further than they had thought. He had been so certain he could fight against their temptations and here he was, hardly a week in their power, and already failing. Forcefully, he turned his gaze away from the bookcase and dropped it back to the floor before him, eyes unconsciously taking in the whirls of the wood. He didn't realize he was staring at it until he noticed one of his hands caressing the grain, following the faint lines of it. With a soft whimper, he folded his hands in his lap, closing his eyes to stop looking, to stop feeling.

A soft popping noise drew his attention and his head jerked up, eyes opening. Then widening as he saw a large red bird with a tail nearly as long as it was, carrying the Sorting Hat in its talons. He and the bird stared at each other for a long moment. Its beak opened and a soft musical sound came out, sounding somehow questioning. Then another, less questioning, this time, and more sorrowful. It glided down to the floor in front of Harry, dropping the hat beside him, and then stretched up on its feet, stretching up its neck until they were eye to eyes. He swallowed heavily. Bright drops appeared in its eyes

and, to his surprise, the bird leaned its head forward to drop the tears lightly on his cheeks.

Harry felt a strange warming sensation that began where those tears landed and spread throughout him, making him feel strangely warm and light. The clenching in his chest released and the lump in his throat smoothed away. His stinging eyes felt soothed and his aching muscles relaxed their tension. He drew in a sharp breath, terrified, as the head brushed against his cheek again. He closed his eyes tightly and clenched his jaw, not knowing what magic was being worked on him, but not trusting it.

He opened his eyes again at the loud sigh, and turned to the hat as the bird stepped back. "This is Fawkes," the hat informed him. "He's a phoenix. The tears can't hurt you. All they do is heal."

"I don't need healing," Harry whispered.

"You," the hat stated firmly, "need healing more than anyone I've ever seen. And believe you me, I've seen a very large number of people indeed. Now. Put me on, if you please."

"I-- I'd rather not," he whispered.

"Yes, I know," the hat stated, voice startlingly gentle. "But you must anyway, you see."

Reluctantly, the boy obeyed, lifting the hat and placing it gingerly onto his head, swallowing as it fell further down, obscuring his vision.

"I know. You're scared. I'm sorry for it, but there's no real way around it for now," the hat said, softly. "Now I shall see what must be done first."

There followed a harrowing search through his memories and thoughts, with an occasional acerbic comment or murmured curse thrown in by the hat. It studied the memories of his recent punishments with food especially closely, and the more distant memories of eating and hunger with the Dursleys. Finally, it said decidedly, "Well. That's interesting. The headmaster had wondered why there had been no occurrences of accidental magic from you.

Not one since you were two or three. He didn't wonder enough to check on you, though, more's the pity. Tell me, child. Is it worse to get hungry quickly or to do magic?"

"To do magic," he answered instantly, needing no thought for that one.

"Excellent. Did you know that you're doing magic as we speak? And have been, more or less constantly, for several years now?"

Harry felt his heart clench and his breathing lighten to short fearful gasps. "What?" he managed.

"Yes, I'm afraid so. Your ... family had their information slightly off, you see. It is not a common thing for a witch or wizard to be able to live without food, deserving or no. So in your attempts to obey their orders not to be hungry, and not to eat, you used magic to ... stretch the food you ate. Rather dramatically, actually. Much more so than I would have imagined possible, even so far as getting reasonable nourishment from things that really ought to have left you much sicker. Or dead. That is why you've been throwing up since you came to the school and have been eating more normally. At first I thought that it was simply a matter of your body being out of practice in accepting food and rejecting it. But it's more than that. Your magic magnifies and stretches it to an incredible degree, making it seem, to your body, that you've overeaten. You're using every thread of magic you can to nourish yourself. I can help you stop doing the magic, if you like."

"Yes," he whispered. "Please. I-- I mustn't--"

"Use magic. I know," it said, voice expressionless. "In order to stop the magic you must first be able to tell when you are using it. Do you remember how Snape had you look through illusions to the wall?"

"Yes," he said, slowly, uncertainly.

"Excellent. What I want you to do is close your eyes, and then focus in that same way."

Beneath the brim, Harry blinked. "I-- How can I focus with my eyes closed?"

"Nobody ever said it would be easy," the hat commented.

Slowly, gradually, the hat talked him through the process, studying his thoughts and advising him, until suddenly, despite the fact that his eyes were closed and covered by the hat's material, sight burst upon him. A thin pale veil hung directly before his eyes, and, beyond that, he saw other things. A square of light where the door had been. The bird was glowing so brightly it almost hurt his eyes. His eyes slammed open and the light vanished. "What--"

"Very good!" the hat murmured. "Very good indeed. You saw the magic. When you look at yourself you will always see a faint magic -- a light glow. The one directly before your eyes was me. And the door was the painting. Fawkes was, of course himself. Some of the other things you have in the room you would also have seen, had you looked their way. But for now, you must find that way of looking again, and this time look down at yourself. There will always be a faint glow. Everyone has that. But if you have a brighter glow around your stomach and digestive tract, that means that magic is actively affecting that area of you. Try again, please, and this time look down before opening your eyes."

"But this *is* magic!" he whispered desperately, pleadingly. "I don't want to."

"I know," the hat said simply. "And yet you must. Because if you don't do this little bit of magic, you will continue doing a much greater magic. Practically all the time. Which is worse?"

Harry searched within himself, trying desperately to work out the riddle. Finally, his shoulders slumped, and he nodded his resignation. "Very well."

Again, he turned his gaze inwards. This time he held the focus that let him see the light when it appeared and turned his gaze downwards. In horror, he found that the hat was right. His midsection was glowing nearly as brightly as the bird. He bit his lip, hard, staring down at himself in horror.

"Very good," the hat applauded, as though blind to his misery. "Very good indeed. Now you must touch that magic with your mind and tell it that you don't need it any more. That you want it to stop."

One hand twitched towards his stomach, and the hat snapped, "No, don't touch with your hands. That will only confuse you. In fact, lay your hands palm down on the floor so that you aren't tempted to use them, please. Now. Touch with your mind." Harry obeyed, slowly, flattening his hands on the floor beside his knees, and began to say the words, but the hat interrupted again. "No, not like that. Not saying it or thinking it. *Knowing* it. It cannot be simply words, but meaning. Belief. You must want it to end, you must convince it that it is unnecessary."

That, at least, was not hard. He *didn't* want it. Didn't need it. Wanted nothing to do with the magic. It clung obstinately to him, despite his beliefs.

"Think not about the magic itself, but about what it's doing," the hat murmured. "Think about having plenty of food, about not needing to stretch a little. Think about not being hungry."

"I'm *not* hungry," Harry whispered.

"You are, actually. It's just that your concept of hunger has been twisted to the point that you don't think you're hungry until any one else would be sobbing with the misery of it. But it's not me you have to convince, but your magic. This will not last, by the way. You shall have to do this several times a day until the magic finally comes to realize that you do not need it. And I would recommend you be very careful to keep fed. Have a couple small meals in between the meals with the professors, and possibly another just before you go to bed. If you get hungry -- that means real hunger, not just what you consider hunger, if you feel even the slightest bit empty -- the magic will feel itself needed and come back. If you keep full for a while it will gradually give up its attempts to help you in that way."

Harry nodded his understanding, concentration completely focused on convincing the magic that he did not need it to help him. And gradually the glow in his middle faded until, at last, it vanished,

leaving a pale glow that was the same as the rest of his body. Exhausted, he drooped forward.

"When you wake up in the morning, look again to see if it has returned and, if so, release it again. It will get easier with practice," the hat murmured. "You did well, Harry. And tonight will be the first night in some time you'll fall asleep not using magic. A thing to be proud of, no?"

Confused, Harry shook his head. This couldn't be right. He had the sinking feeling that his family would be horrified at what he had just done. And yet, it was true that he had been using magic, and that it appeared to have stopped now. "I don't know," he whispered. "I want my uncle," he added, voice cracking slightly.

"I know you do. But he's not here, you know. I daresay you'll disbelieve almost everything I say, but I'll try to help you, Harry."

"You want to corrupt me," he said, too exhausted to put much emotion into the statement.

"I? No, Harry. I've seen corruption and I should be very sorry indeed to see it touch you. No, indeed, that is the farthest thing from what I want. Come now, have I not helped you?"

Harry shook his head, feeling tears of exhaustion and fear and misery and confusion leak out of his eyes and trail slowly down his cheeks. "I don't know," he whispered. "I don't know. And I don't trust you."

"That's okay, Harry," the hat murmured reassuringly. "You don't need to trust me. Not for now. Just keep an eye on that magic of yours, okay? You don't want to be using it by mistake, do you?"

"No."

"That's right. You're exhausted. Go to bed, now, Harry."

Harry's eyes snapped open, startled. "Bed? I -- I can't."

"You can, though. There's no closet here, is there? And you must sleep somewhere."

"The corner--" he began.

"You've been very lucky, so far, you know." The tone was conversational, now. "Very lucky that nobody has walked in and found you sleeping not where you were meant to be. Or a house elf commented to someone that your bed was not slept in. How long do you think that would last? What would your uncle say to you if you aroused suspicion in such a way?"

A shudder ran through Harry's body.

"That's right. Is it more important to follow the rules of your family's house, or to avert suspicion?"

"I don't *know*."

"Well. If they notice something's strange, something more, I mean, because they're already watching you a little more closely than they were at first, you know. But, as I was saying, if they notice something that makes them *really* worried, they'll question you. Question you in ways you can't hide from. The headmaster can look into your mind almost as easily as I do. The difference is that he's more polite and, not realizing yet that there might be reason for him to set aside that politeness, has not looked. But if he does he will see all. Do you want to give him reason to look?"

"No," he whispered.

"That's right. Good boy. Go to bed, Harry. Sleep. It'll be okay," the hat murmured, sounding suddenly ancient and infinitely sad. "I'll talk to you again soon."

"Yes, sir," he murmured, feeling that it was wrong and yet unable to find a better path. He removed the hat and, reluctantly, stepped towards the bed. Carefully, he climbed up onto it, setting himself atop the covers.

"You'll arouse less suspicion if they find you *in* the bed," the hat called quietly across the room.

Obedient to the implicit instruction, Harry crawled between the sheets and lay, stiff and still but for the shuddering he couldn't suppress.

"Good," the hat murmured. "I'll talk to you again soon, Harry. Sleep well."

There was a flash of light as the hat and bird vanished, and Harry stared up at the canopy of the bed. Finally, he murmured, "Nox." Darkness fell, and he began to recite his catechism, voice shaking helplessly with reaction and fatigue.

Harry drew in a deep breath and exhaled slowly, not letting the whimper building in his throat escape. He hurt. Everywhere. His back and his arms and his legs -- everything hurt. Punishment for sleeping in the bed, no doubt. He slid out of the bed, not touching the covers any more than necessary, and toppled to his hands and knees, as his legs screamed with agony. He lowered himself further to his knees, letting his forehead rest on the cold stone as he tried to draw himself together. Since he deserved his punishment, he wasn't supposed to show the pain of it. But it was so hard...

He forced himself to his feet, suppressing another wince of pain. For a long moment he swayed unsteadily, eyes closed. Finally, he opened his eyes and looked at the bed. The covers were mussed where he'd slept. Moving forward, he smoothed back the comforter, and began tightening the sheets. Once the bed was made to his satisfaction, the pain had faded slightly and he no longer felt likely to fall down if he moved too suddenly. Glancing at the clock, he saw that it was seven-thirty. He'd slept considerably later than usual. Memories of the night before, of how he'd gotten so tired, made him freeze in place, thinking. Uncle Vernon would be so disappointed in him. He'd forgotten everything he'd learned and played their unnatural game with ... abandon. Abandoning his principles and beliefs to a rush of evil magic and speed. How could he have done such a thing? And so easily? Was he truly so weak-minded? And then the hat. His mind shied away from thinking too closely on the hat. Surely there were arguments he could have made, some way he could have fought it. And yet, he had done nothing.

Finishing with the bed, he made his way into the bathroom and looked uncertainly at the toilet, sink, and small tub. No shower, as the headmaster had stated. Uncertainly, he half-filled the tub with cold water, and then climbed into it. It was achingly cold as he dipped his head under, fingertips digging furiously at his scalp. He clenched his teeth to keep them from chattering, and washed as quickly as he could without sacrificing thoroughness. Finally satisfied with his condition, he pulled the plug and stood still, waiting as the water dripped off him and drained out of the tub. He began to shiver, but

quickly forced himself to stillness as he slowly dried in the chilly air. Once he was dry enough that he wouldn't risk making a mess, he stepped out of the tub and glanced around.

Noticing that he now had only about ten minutes to get to breakfast on time, Harry dressed quickly and headed off down the halls. His whole body was screaming by the time he reached the Great Hall. He tried not to limp as he crossed the hall, but apparently didn't manage well enough.

"Are you okay, Harry?" the headmaster called, tone concerned, as Harry neared the table.

Before he came up with a suitable response, Madam Pomfrey had rounded on Madam Hooch and demanded, "What did you give him yesterday? After the flying?"

"Nothing!" the tall woman answered defensively. "I just fixed up his hands and let him go."

Throwing up her hands in disgusted dismay, the nurse rose and moved around the table with startling speed. "Sometimes I wonder if the lot of you have a grain of sense to share between you," she threw over her shoulder. "You *know* he has never exercised -- of *course* he's cramping up after a workout like that. Let's go to the infirmary. You must be in agony!" she finished more gently, reaching Harry and dropping to one knee before him, looking him over worriedly.

"I'm okay, ma'am," he said softly.

She muttered something about little boys and bravery, and drew her wand. "Nonsense. You're as stiff as a rail, child. We must go to the infirmary -- potions are much more useful than spells in situations like this. But I can at least do some numbing charms to ease the pain a bit while we walk."

The spell washed through Harry in a cool burst, leaving him feeling almost nothing in his body, just a bit of a tingle but no pain or discomfort at all. He suppressed a shiver at the unnatural sensation and struggled against the realization that he was grateful for it -- had even enjoyed it. Forcing his attention more firmly onto the nurse, he

followed her out of the hall, listening carefully as she continued talking.

"Madam Hooch was telling me about the gift Mr. Zabini gave you. She was even so kind as to give me a demonstration, as I'd not seen a training-Snitch before. I have been trying to come up with some way to provide you with a bit of aerobic exercise that was more fun than just insisting that you jog through the castle every day, and I think this might well be just what we need. I think chasing this toy of yours will do rather well. So I'd like you to chase it for at least forty-five minutes a day on weekdays. You can split it up, but not into more than three equal pieces -- at least fifteen minutes a go, that is. As your muscle tone and endurance improve, we might increase the amount of time. But, for now, forty-five minutes every day except weekends. Okay?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good. And here we are. Up on the bed, with you."

Only a few minutes later, Harry had swallowed two foul-tasting potions and Madam Pomfrey removed her spell. Sensation rushed back, but the muscles which had previously been agonizing now just had a faint burning sensation, like his arms after he scrubbed the floor very hard. But his stomach, which he hadn't noticed in the midst of the rest of the pain, was now impossible to ignore. It was a ravenous void, roiling and aching as it usually did only just before he showed his defiance and the Dursleys insisted that he eat. No. It was worse, even, than that. As bad as the time he had been confined to his cupboard for a week after a full week of not eating. By the time the door was opened, his defiance had been punished by agonizing pain and he was so weak he couldn't even stand. This time at least he could rise, but he swayed slightly on his feet.

"Easy," Madam Pomfrey murmured, steadying him. "The muscle relaxant can put your balance a little off. I'll send a bowl of salve to your room to put on in the evening. Just rub it on any aching muscles, okay? It's not as fast acting as the potion, but I think it will do the trick. And after a few days -- a couple of weeks at the most -- of regular exercise, it should stop hurting afterwards. At least so much. Okay?"

"Yes, ma'am. Thank you, ma'am."

"Not at all. And if it makes you hurt in any way other than the muscle burning -- or if it makes your muscles burn too much -- you come talk to me. Now let's get back to breakfast, shall we? I don't know about you, but I'm starving."

Harry colored as his stomach chose that moment to rumble loudly. "Sorry, ma'am."

"Quite all right," she replied enthusiastically, looking extremely pleased. "I like it when people agree with me -- verbally or otherwise," she added with a wink. "Let's go before the others empty the table altogether."

Harry ate ravenously, although he was careful to be neat and to keep an eye out for any sign of disapproval. He was nearly finished his plateful when he realized that his punishment hadn't been triggered. He felt ... strange. But not ill. Perhaps the hat was right and he had been using magic -- so the punishment had been for the magic and not the food. But Aunt Petunia said it was because he didn't deserve to eat. He stared down at his mostly-empty plate, troubled. What could it mean?

"I'm pleased to see your appetite picking up," the headmaster said approvingly. "Would you like some more of anything?"

"No, sir," he answered automatically. "Thank you, sir."

"If you're sure. For today, I'll have you continue exploring the school, but, also, Professor Sprout has offered to let you work with her for a while. One of her greenhouses is clear glass and we think it might be a starting point on working with your discomfort with the sky. You'd have something visible and solid between you and it, but it would still be visible. You had windows at the Dursleys, of course -- did you experience any trouble looking out them?"

"No, sir," he admitted. Then, greatly daring, added, "But-- But I didn't look out them much."

"No? I'd have expected you to look out all the time, since you couldn't actually leave the house."

Harry hesitated a moment but, finally, answered, "I-- I couldn't really see, sir."

"Ah, true. I had nearly forgotten. Well, we'll give it a try and see how it goes."

"I won't be doing anything terribly interesting for a little while," Professor Sprout joined in from her spot a few seats down. "But I'll call you with your map when I'm ready for you. There's an inner door connecting the castle proper with the nearest greenhouse, and we can go through that way. So I'll meet you near it."

"Yes, ma'am," he agreed. He remembered finding a door on the first floor on the outer wall that had had a glass panel on it. Through the panel he had seen a room filled with tables and benches and shelves, all of them laden with plants. On the map, the door had been marked with red, so he hadn't attempted to go past.

Excused to resume his exploration, Harry left the Great Hall and made his way to the place on the fifth floor he had last been exploring. It was disconcerting to eat so much without getting ill, and odder still to feel the strange tightness in his stomach -- a tightness that was not at all uncomfortable. At least, not physically uncomfortable.

With a shiver, he turned his attention to focus on the corridors and rooms, even on the magical map. On anything but the question of whether or not to believe the hat. And what was the truth if the hat's words were lies.

Sudden pressure on his calf made Harry look down to find Mrs. Norris staring up at him. He felt his lips flicker slightly, and quelled them, waiting. She backed away, and then jumped up. He caught her in one arm and the other hand moved almost automatically to begin rubbing lightly behind her ears, rewarded by her loud rusty purr.

Since he could not spread the map while holding her, Harry moved through the parts of the floor he had explored the day before, reminding himself of where everything was, and ensuring that he

remembered properly. When he was certain he had remembered everything clearly, he stopped, waiting until Mrs. Norris grew tired of his attention. Which, at last, she did, leaping from his arms and wandering away without a backward glance.

Once she was out of sight, Harry pulled out the map and spread it out, looking over the area he had just explored and figuring out his route for the rest. Decided, he moved purposefully through the halls, cataloguing the rooms he found. There was another of the ones whose inner dimensions didn't match the map, and he mentally marked it to return to later. There had been several such, and he would like to figure out why.

In a startlingly short period of time, his stomach began to remind Harry of its presence. The discomfort grew rapidly and, finally, he paused in a small room, shifting nervously. He wasn't supposed to be hungry this soon. It wasn't right. The Dursleys would be so angry with him for it. But what if the hat was right, and if he didn't eat, he'd start doing magic? He hesitated for a long moment, then dropped to his knees, closed his eyes, and tried to see as he had the previous night. It was easier this time, which was worrisome in and of itself. Was it really better to deliberately do magic like this, even if it meant he could find out if he was *unconsciously* doing magic and stop it? Casting the question aside for the moment, he looked down at himself and saw threads of magic glowing. Perfectly still, he watched them for several minutes, trying to decide a course. And as he watched, each thread grew and wound itself more firmly about the others. He realized that he was slowly coming to feel a little less hungry. With a gasp he tried to disband the little knot of magic. It refused. After struggling with it for several minutes, he realized that if the hat was right, the only way to get rid of the magic would be to convince his body that he wasn't hungry. And since his body wasn't listening to reason, he would have to eat. The Dursleys would want him to do so, in such a situation, wouldn't they? He suppressed his uncertainty as he rose to his feet and began moving swiftly through the halls towards the kitchen.

The house elves were delighted to feed him. Indeed, the pleasure they took in watching him eat was highly unnerving. It made him question his decision -- perhaps, after all, they were trying to subvert

him and he was playing directly into their hands. And yet, he'd seen the magic, and he knew that the only way to stop it was to eat. He ate until he could convince the magic to stop working, then stopped and headed back towards where he had been exploring. Before he could get there, the map ruffled, drawing his attention. A purple line had formed, connecting his present position to the stairs down to the second floor. He followed it obediently, and continued following it as the map reshaped to show the second floor, and, finally, the first.

Professor Sprout was waiting for him just outside the glass-paneled door, and smiled warmly when she saw him. "There you are! I wasn't sure where you'd be so I wasn't at all certain how long the wait would be." Harry took a breath to apologize, but as interrupted, "I'm pleased you were so close! Let me show you around!"

Harry followed the cheerful witch through the glass door and into a long room filled with potted plants on long tables. The walls and ceiling were of translucent panes of glass, so, to his relief, Harry got a general impression of brown and green under blue and white, but nothing more detailed than that.

"I'll give you a bit of a tour, first off," the witch said. "This, as the only greenhouse connected to the school proper, has the plants that require the least sunlight. They're shadowed a lot of the day. Like in most of the greenhouses, there's a mix of magical and mundane." She paused, looking at him, and added thoughtfully, "Goodness, I just realized -- you've had a hard start to your life, Mr. Potter. I daresay you've had very little contact even with non-magical plants?"

"Yes, ma'am. Aunt Petunia kept three of potted plants, but nothing more."

"My poor child! That will never do!" She began pointing out different plants, telling him their names and properties, and explaining their needs and preferences. "But I could talk for hours of my plants," she finally interrupted herself with a chuckle. "And though you're being very good-natured to listen to my rambling, I'd hate to bore you to tears."

"No, ma'am!" he said quickly, horrified.

Professor Sprout smiled warmly down at him, brown eyes dancing. "I know how long a lad your age enjoys simply listening, and I know we're perilously near the limit, though you're too polite to say so. Let me give you a whirlwind tour of the rest of the rooms, then we'll get to work."

"Yes, ma'am," he agreed, reassured by the thought of work to do.

There were ten greenhouses altogether, connected in the shape of an elongated H. The one he first entered was the first of five connected end to end, and the fourth one had another door in the center of its side. Professor Sprout explained that these five were the most similar to each other, varying only in the amount of light and humidity, and in what they contained, of course. Once she'd spent a few minutes in each one explaining what types of plants were contained in it, Professor Sprout took him back to the fourth one and opened the side door.

Rather than the colorless translucent glass that had composed the other rooms, this one was made up of panes of warmly colored glass, each illuminating a section of the plant life within with its hue. Shades ranging from reddish purple to bright crimson to burnt orange -- and on through the shades of orange and yellow until it was nearly green. There were at least a couple dozen different panes, each with its own distinct hue.

Harry swallowed as he noticed that each colored patch of light was directly below its corresponding pane, although the sun was far from directly above them.

"Some plants need particularly colored light to thrive," Professor Sprout explained. "It used to be we needed a different room for each shade -- which not only took a great deal of space, but also a great deal of very carefully made and dyed glass, which was extremely expensive. Luckily, some thirty years ago, Frederick Occulum, an astronomer and lens-grinder, created the lumen lento charm, which causes glass to accept and reflect light as always -- but to reflect only in one direction. It wasn't at all what he wanted, poor man. He was trying to find a way to bottle starlight -- convinced that the wealthy would buy it to light their houses as a light that was gentler than any

other on the complexion. But I, for one, have found this far more valuable. We use it in this room and the next. Warm colors in here, and cool in the other," she added, opening the next door and waving him in to another, similar, room, this one awash in shades of purple, blue, and green.

They entered it at the center and there was, again, a door on each end. After speaking for a few minutes about the plants in this room, she waved him to the door on the right, the one back towards the school. The next room, which Harry stepped into relieved to be escaping the obvious magic of the previous two, was still more different. Instead of long tables filled with potted plants, here the plants grew directly from the ground. A gravel path, edged in brick, wound through it, and a large pool filled the middle, with a small stream flowing away from it and under the wall into the next room. The ceiling was higher, as well, and some of the plants were tall enough to brush it.

"All of them are muggle," Professor Sprout commented, looking around fondly. "Although we have some rarities. And many of them are certainly useful in potions making. This room is perfectly safe -- everything poisonous has been warded to prevent anyone accidentally touching them. This next room's a little different," she added, laying her palm against the next door and murmuring a short phrase.

Beyond it was another room of about the same size. It was similar to the previous in as much as the life was wilder than in the other rooms, it was warm and moist, and the stream from the first flowed into it to collect in a stone and earth pool at its center. But there was more color, more variation -- and more movement, he realized, turning as he caught a flicker of motion in the corner of his eye. Nothing was there, that he noticed.

"This is the magical version of the Rainforest Room," Professor Sprout informed him. "Some of the plants here are extremely rare. And some are extremely dangerous, which is why it is off limits without my express permission," she added, voice suddenly stern.

"Yes, ma'am," he agreed instantly.

"Good lad. The path's charmed to keep everything off, so as long as you stay on it, nothing can harm you. Nonetheless, accidents do happen, so nobody is allowed in without me, except for a couple of my most trusted senior students. So it's not personal."

"No, ma'am," he agreed, confused by the reassurance.

The professor looked around wistfully for a few moments, and then shook her head. "If I start showing you around in here, I'll lose hours to it. It shall have to wait for another day, for I truly do have to get these Finders Fins replanted. Their soil is not nearly so rich as it ought to be. I must be getting old not to have noticed sooner, but there. No harm done. They'll recover quickly enough, if we switch them over promptly. Are you quite sure you don't mind assisting me?"

"Of course, Professor Sprout," he answered softly, following her back through the Rainforest Room and the blue room into the final one. His breath caught in panic as he found himself beneath the open sky. He refocused his eyes -- but this was no illusion and it failed to vanish.

A light hand on his shoulder made him suck in a ragged breath and try to force his muscles to relax.

"Easy, Harry. It's just a window. Just glass," the professor said gently.

Grasping frantically at the words, he pulled back his focus a little, searching for the tell-tales. The framework that the glass was mounted on, the occasional smudge on a pane. Gradually, his breathing evened out with the understanding that there was, indeed, something between him and that horrible void.

"Good lad," the herbology teacher murmured, hand squeezing his shoulder slightly. "You're okay now?"

"Yes, ma'am," he agreed. "Sorry, ma'am."

"Nothing to be sorry for. It's not your fault. Just take a little while to catch your breath."

"I'm fine, ma'am," he said quickly.

She looked at him for a long, measuring moment, and then nodded decisively. "Very well, then." She led him across the greenhouse to a long table heavily laden with pots. Each contained a small plant with broad, sail-like leaves of dark purple. "These are Finders Fins," Professor Sprout explained. "The astronomers of the plant world. They're magical plants that have the gift of recognizing where they are and pointing towards a different location. You can set them up to point to anywhere you like, like a sort of adjustable compass. But the way they pick their direction is by the movement of the sun and stars. So they only work under a clear sky, and they must grow to maturity under one as well or they don't learn the stars properly and give false points. I have a network with several other herbalists around the world, and we send them around to live at each place for a few months while they're young so that they can know the sky over as much of the world as possible. These ones just came to me from a colleague in New Zealand, and I suspect that their soil got leached during the trip as I can't imagine Ignatius would be so careless as to pot them in such poor soil. It happens sometimes and I should have noticed it right off, of course, but what's done is done. For now it must be corrected by repotting them."

Harry watched attentively as the woman demonstrated the technique for repotting the plants, and then carefully mimicked it. He hid his surprise when she continued working quietly beside him, only occasionally commenting on the specifics of the technique, rather than leaving him to his task. Harry worked steadily, quickly losing himself in the rhythm of the job, though Professor Sprout's companionably silence as she worked alongside him was disconcerting. Usually he was either left alone or berated for his incompetence.

He lost himself enough in his work that he didn't notice she had stopped until she clapped him lightly on the shoulder. He dropped to perfect stillness in surprise, rather than jumping as another might.

"Time does fly, doesn't it?" she asked cheerfully. "We're nearly out of it now, though -- you'd best go get cleaned up or you'll be late for dinner."

"I'm sorry, Professor Sprout," he said, surveying the unfinished work in dismay.

"Sorry? My dear boy -- whatever for?" she asked, startled.

"I didn't finish in time."

A hand touched his chin and he suppressed a shiver at the contact, relaxing his jaw and obediently raising his head to look into her concerned smile.

"Did I suggest that this was your task to handle or even that you had a quota to make?" she began.

"I'm sorry -- I don't know what a quota is," he admitted, knowing that he was digging himself deeper.

"It means a set amount that must be accomplished by a set time. And I am truly sorry if I suggested you had one. This is my job to do and you have sped matters up considerably. I'd intended this as simply a pleasant afternoon productively spent, not a chore or detention-work," she smiled at him. "I shall have to be more careful with my wording, I see."

"It's my fault for not understanding," he answered quickly. "I'm sorry." For not understanding -- and for not remembering the deception. The pretense that he was normal. If he had a task to do and a set period of time in which to do it, it was his duty to see that he completed it in that time or accepted his punishment becomingly. But she was pretending he wasn't bad. It was so hard to know how they would react to things. To know how he should behave. Sooner or later, though, the punishments would come. And to be punished for so much at once -- he must try to work within their game, to do what he ought without shattering their lies. But it was so hard. "I'm not hungry, ma'am. Really," he said, slowly, ignoring the ache in his stomach that belied the statement. And it was disturbing enough that it was already back so soon. But he cast that thought aside for the moment. "Can I stay and ... help a bit longer?" The hesitation felt long to him as he searched for a word that would both fit and be acceptable to her, but she made no sign of noticing.

"Not at all -- because *I*, for one, am quite hungry," she told him, laughing. "And by the time dinner ends the light will begin to fail. But if you'd like to help me again tomorrow afternoon, I'd be glad of your assistance."

"Yes, ma'am," he agreed.

"And bring along the Witches' Wode that Neville Longbottom gave you, if you'd like me to take a look at it, make sure it's healthy and give you some advice on how to care for it."

"Thank you, ma'am," he murmured. "I will."

He fell into a pattern over the following weeks. Mornings he explored, afternoons he helped Professor Sprout, and after dinner he dashed about the castle in pursuit of his Snitch. He grew more successful at forcing the magic in his stomach to cease its work, as long as he ate regularly. If he didn't respond quickly to pangs of hunger so slight he didn't even consider them hunger, he could lose days' progress in convincing the magic that it was unnecessary and unwanted. The elves began sending him away with his pockets full of fruit or wrapped sandwiches to eat over the course of the day, or showing up at random points with snacks and watching sternly, hands on hips, until he finished them. Gradually he got used to the constant eating, although he continued to worry about what his family's reaction would be.

When he was comfortable with his overall grasp of the layout of the school, Harry returned to the first room where the size had failed to match his expectations, and began to explore it more carefully. Almost without thinking about it, he refocused his vision to see through illusions and immediately saw a small door behind the wheel-back chair. He hesitated a long moment before he slipped around the chair and touched the doorknob. Reminding himself that seeing through magic was more anti-magic than magic -- and wondering if he was simply making excuses -- he turned the knob and pressed lightly at the door.

With a quiet creak, the door slid open, and Harry slipped inside. He found himself in what had once apparently been a study. Shelves were built into the walls around most of the room, a stone fireplace

set in a break between them, across from the door. A solid looking desk stood before it, with a leather chair at the ready. In the corner of the room, a larger, more comfortable-looking chair stood with an ottoman before it. Everything was covered in such a thick layer of dust that he couldn't tell if there were papers on the desk or what color the upholstery on the chair was.

Fingers itching to begin cleaning, he looked carefully about the room. Regretfully, he backed out, carefully closing the door behind him. He had to continue with his explorations until the headmaster gave him new instructions. He began searching the other rooms and passageways that appeared to have secrets, and found more hidden rooms, corridors, and staircases. Some were a simple matter of looking through an illusion. For others, he had to push on a particular piece of molding or pull out a certain book from a shelf. He remembered Dudley's phase of being fascinated with mysteries and secret passages from a couple years back, and knew that everything he found *could* be built by muggle means with levers and catches and springs. He suspected that they were not, but continued to explore them nonetheless.

He didn't give it any thought the first time he emerged from a passageway to find himself in an area he'd never been before, and that the only entrance to on the map was marked in red. He had not gone through the passageway marked as forbidden, and had been permitted, and even encouraged, to go everywhere that was not so marked. Finding the secret rooms and passageways was what he needed to do in order to follow the orders he'd been given: explore and learn his way about the castle. It never occurred to him, for example, that because the portrait of the well-fed lady in the pink dress was warded, he should refrain from entering the red and gold draped rooms beyond her through the crawlway behind a suit of sixteenth-century armor a couple hallways away. Although he did wonder, as he approached an increasing number of warded doors separately from each side, what could make so many doorways dangerous. He didn't even consider asking someone -- if he was intended to know, surely someone would tell him.

Some two weeks after his birthday, Harry slipped into his room in the evening with an apologetic greeting to Augustus, who was trying very

hard to befriend him, and set the Snitch down on its shelf, not letting fingers or eyes linger on it. Chasing the little winged ball was exhilarating in a way he'd never experienced before. He was too used to being honest with himself about his flaws to be able to deny that it was fun, even knowing that his very enjoyment of it was proof of his corruption. He tried to hate it as he ought, but each time his hour ran out, he had to fight back a wave of regret.

"Good to see you again," a serious voice interrupted his thoughts.

Harry spun towards it, and found the Sorting Hat resting on his desk. He swallowed. He hadn't forgotten the hat, of course, but he had blocked out his memories of it as much as possible, and hoped it would leave him alone.

"Yes, I knew you'd be glad to see me," the hat murmured sardonically. "Come along now, put me on." When he hesitated, it added a sharp, "Now!"

Reluctantly, Harry moved to it and fought back a shiver as he felt it begin to rifle through his memories of the past couple weeks. He remained perfectly still, knowing he had no defense against the mental attack. "You're doing rather well at suppressing your food magic. Better than I would have expected," it commented after a few minutes. Harry waited, teeth clenched, as it continued sifting through his memories. "My, my," the hat finally murmured. "Hogwarts has been sharing her secrets with you, I see. Well, let's see if you've found anyplace that will work as a meeting place. I intend to start meeting with you more frequently, but this room simply isn't secure enough. Let's see..." it murmured, voice fading to silence as it continued moving through his mind. It paused on a memory of the first secret room he had discovered. "Ah," the long sigh ruffled Harry's hair. "Perfect. Here then, tomorrow, after breakfast. You can go back to your explorations afterwards. I hope, Harry, that one day you will find it in you to like Hogwarts," the hat added after a slight pause, "for she likes you very much indeed."

A pop of displaced air signaled Fawkes's entrance, and the hat was plucked from Harry's head. The big bird settled on his shoulder for a moment, nuzzling his cheek and trilling softly. Unthinkingly, Harry

reached up to pet him as he would Mrs. Norris. Realizing what he was doing, he snatched his hand back, but not before the bird made a sound startlingly similar to the cat's purr, and the hat chuckled. "Keep that up and you'll gain a friend for life, Harry. But we'd best go before we're missed, old friend."

The phoenix gave a disappointed trill and rubbed his head along Harry's cheek one more time, leaving behind a single tear that seemed to warm and sooth him as it slid down his face. Then the bird launched itself back into the air, swung around the room once, and then vanished in another pop of fire and displaced air.

Realizing that his hand had risen to touch the teardrop, Harry quickly dropped it to his side and tried to ignore the sensation as the drop slowly evaporated. Finally, when the disturbing sense of well being had faded to the point where he could ignore it altogether, he turned his attention towards getting ready for bed. He slipped into the bathroom, cleaned up, brushed his teeth, and put on his pajamas. Unable to put it off any longer, he returned to the bed and climbed into it, curling up into a ball in an attempt to touch as little of the sheets as he could. "Nox," he whispered, cringing not at how he was plunged abruptly into darkness but at the knowledge that he was activating magic. A golden spot danced before his eyes, an afterimage of the light, and his hand twitched for an instant as he imagined a blur of tiny wings on it. Clenching his eyes only made it dance faster, and he forced himself to ignore it as it faded.

"I am a freak," he began, murmuring the familiar words with painful sincerity.

The next day, Harry obediently reported to the secret room after breakfast, and found both hat and phoenix already there waiting for him. The bird was perched on the back of the desk chair, tail lifted slightly to avoid drooping in the dust, and the hat was nose deep in it on the desk. As the door opened, the hat sneezed loudly, starting a little whirlwind of dust -- which made it sneeze again. "I still say this is the perfect place to meet," it stated, nose twitching as it caught its breath. "But I do admit that it needs some work. Harry, lad, could you grab some rags from the storage room -- you remember where it is -- and knock down enough of this mess that we can sit a bit more

comfortably? I'd simply summon a house elf, except that the whole point of being here is that we don't want anyone to know about it."

"Of course," Harry exclaimed, with more alacrity than he'd shown for anything thus far. At last he was allowed a task that he both understood and knew to be *good*. He vanished out of the room and reappeared several minutes later with not only a few rags, but also a waste bin and a brush and dustpan. He'd wanted to get a pail of soapy water as well, and some sponges, but wasn't sure how patient the hat would be if he took more time.

He fell to with a will, first sweeping off the desk and chairs and dumping the dust into the bin, then going to more carefully with a rag.

"You really don't have to--" the hat began to say, sounding a bit taken aback. He was interrupted by a squawk from Fawkes and broke off for a moment, and then said thoughtfully, "Then again, this will be fine. We can talk while you clean."

Harry emptied another dustpan full of dust into the bin, and then blinked. "It's gone," he said, voice carefully neutral. "Yes, well, dust isn't exactly something you'd be wanting back, is it? Most of the trash bins around the school are charmed to dispose of dust as soon as it enters them. They'd just totally empty except that sometimes people drop in things they then wish they hadn't and would be upset to lose all together. But nobody needs dust back again. There's no good worrying about the magic of it, lad. You won't find anything here that doesn't do it, and if you did you wouldn't find any place to empty it into that didn't use magic."

Harry forced a nod and continued to work, a little of his joy in the task vanished at the realization that here even cleaning was unclean. But the familiar work soothed him and soon he felt more comfortable than he had since he had been brought here.

"So," the hat said, when Harry had dropped into the rhythm of the work. "As you understand it, everyone here knows that you're bad and are involved in a massive conspiracy to make you worse, right?"

"You know it's true," Harry stated, voice colorless.

The hat whistled, long and low. "Wow, you're pretty important, huh?"

The boy's jaw dropped as he turned to stare at the hat. "I am nothing!"

"Really? But I thought you said all of these wizards and witches are going through this complex masquerade just to trick you? That seems like a lot of trouble to go through if you don't matter at all."

Brow wrinkling, Harry stared at it for a long moment, then returned to sweeping dust from the floor into the dustpan and depositing it into the bin.

"I mean, even having the party and involving their own children in it and everything," the hat continued. "It seems like they must have a pretty strong investment in you."

"They want to seduce me over to magic," he stated.

"But you want to be treated as the Dursleys treat you. As ... you deserve?" the hat asked, a split-second's hesitation before the final phrase, which was stated in a voice empty of any emotion.

"Yes."

"And you deserve it because you're magical?"

"Yes."

"But then, doesn't everyone here deserve it, too?"

Harry blinked. "What?"

"Well, if being magic is bad, being deliberately, actively magic is worse, right? So aren't you actually the best person here? Don't all the professors deserve to be treated much worse than you do? They actually teach people to do magic, after all."

Harry began to tremble, trying desperately to find a way to make sense of the Hat's words, to contradict them, to make them fit into his view of the world. "No," he said softly.

"Explain it to me then."

Harry shook his head, lips pressed together, and dumped another load of dust into the bin. "You're trying to trick me," he finally said.

"Am I?"

"Yes. You're twisting things, just like Uncle Vernon said you would. Trying to make me believe things that are *wrong*."

"Then find the error in what I've said, Harry. And when you can show me where I lied, I'll stop saying it. Think about it for a while, and come back here after breakfast the day after tomorrow. Okay? I'll see you then."

Harry forced himself to nod acceptance, his breath coming in short swift gasps as he swept fitfully at the dust, trying to find the error in the hat's slippery suggestions. There had to be a hole. There had to be. Uncle Vernon would see it right off, he knew. If he was good he'd be able to find it. Clenching his eyes, he drew in a long breath, and then released it heavily. He'd find it. He'd find it and prove the hat was wrong. And he wouldn't listen to its questions and suggestions and comments in the future. It was trying to trick him, just like Uncle Vernon had said they would. Only he hadn't expected it to be so hard to see the flaws in the arguments. With a sigh, he rose to his feet, bundled up the cleaning supplies, and returned them to their storage room. Feeling drained by the conversation with the hat, he got back to his explorations, trying desperately to work hard enough to drive the magical construct's words from his head.

Harry slipped behind a tapestry of a forest, climbed three flights of dark, narrow stairs, pulled a metal lever, and stepped out into an undecorated side corridor, a stone wall sliding silently back into place behind him. He left the hallway for another, wider, one, and then turned into a larger one still, this one full of the murmurings of paintings and the rusty shufflings of suits of armor. He walked quickly down the hall, and then turned to face the gargoyle, murmuring, "Candy corn," with no discernible hesitation.

The gargoyle leapt out of the way, and Harry jogged up the spiral staircase to tap lightly on the door at the top.

"Enter," the deep, rich voice from behind it summoned him. Then, as he obeyed, the headmaster's sharp blue eyes smiled at him. "Harry, my boy! Did you forget something?" he asked solicitously.

The pleasure at successfully completing his task dissolved into horror. "Sir?" he asked uncertainly.

Professor Dumbledore's brows rose slightly and he lifted one hand soothingly. "One day, perhaps, I will learn not to jump to conclusions. For now, though, what can I do for you, Harry?"

The boy stepped forward and hesitantly held out a small stack of parchment strips, held carefully to avoid wrinkling them. "You said to return when I had these, sir."

The headmaster blinked, but reached out to accept the stack. "So I did," he murmured. "Quite right." His eyes widened slightly as he flipped through them, but he smiled at Harry and said softly, "Very nicely done, Harry. You got them all. Well, that soothes my last lingering concerns that you might get lost about the castle. You found all the rooms I asked you to very quickly indeed. Well done."

"Thank you, sir," Harry murmured, uncomfortable with the praise.

"I'm not going to take the wards down until next week when the students come, but I am quite satisfied that you no longer require the

map. Even after the wards are down, I would prefer that you stay away from those areas that were marked as warded. Understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"Excellent. For this last week until the children arrive, I'll have you follow your school-year schedule so that we can all get used to it before the first madness of classes. Does this look reasonable?" he asked, passing over a sheet of parchment.

Harry accepted the sheet and read it, struggling to interpret the script, which was decorative in a way that made it quite pretty, but also rather difficult to read. The words came together as he studied them, and he realized that it was a list of days, times, classes, instructors, and locations. He looked at it for a moment longer, trying to work out what the man wanted him to say, then finally fell back on the generally acceptable, "Yes, sir."

"Very good! I shall very much look forward to seeing you Monday afternoon. Tomorrow, Madame Malkin has agreed to come here to make you some robes, since I don't believe you are ready to go exploring Diagon Alley quite yet, for all that Professor Sprout says you are doing much better in her clear greenhouse. Your books and supplies have already been ordered and should be delivered over the next few days. We'll cover your expenses for this year, since I was the one who insisted you come early, but I thought you might like to have a bit of pocket money. I can give you a small loan until you're ready to go to the bank yourself. Any money your aunt and uncle may have sent with you, you can save -- Muggle currency isn't accepted in most Wizing stores, but you can get some Wizing funds from your family vault once you're up to the trip. Until then, let me know if you wish to make a purchase."

"Yes, sir," he agreed, hesitantly, when the wizard looked at him expectantly. He knew what money was, of course. The Dursleys spoke of it rather a lot. They never had enough of it, mostly due to the cost of raising a freak of a child they had never wanted but who they came to love anyway. But he'd never held money, except to collect it neatly when he came across some while cleaning or doing laundry, and had certainly never actually spent any of it himself.

The headmaster opened his mouth to speak again, then paused as his fireplace roared to life. Harry suppressed both his leap of surprise and his shudder of disgust at the magic as a head appeared in it, flickering with green flames.

"You're there, Albus -- good! I just wanted to--" The voice cut off as the man's eyes flickered about the office and took in Harry. "Oh! You've company. I'll try you again later, so sorry!"

"Not at all, dear boy," the headmaster disagreed. "We were just finishing here. Actually, why don't you step through? I'm eager for your report, and there's someone here I'd like you to meet."

"Yes, yes, of course. One moment," the man murmured. Then the light flared brighter as he stepped through and paused, brushing a stray fleck of ash from his shoulder. His eyes again flickered about the room, then landed on Harry and widened. "Harry?" he gasped, eyes roving over the boy with some emotion Harry couldn't read. Unlike almost everyone else Harry had met, this man's eyes made no sign of pausing at his forehead, though.

"Yes, sir?" he asked, quickly turning his full attention on the man. He was a tall, slim man with patched robes and short brown hair punctuated with a few strands of gray. His skin seemed somehow thin and was pale, except for the dark smudges beneath his eyes, but those eyes were a warm chocolate brown and filled with something that Harry had never seen before.

The headmaster smiled genially. "There, I see that I need not introduce you after all."

"No," the man breathed. "I'm sure you've heard it before by now, Harry, but you do look remarkably like your father. But you won't remember me -- I'm Remus Lupin. I was ... I was good friends with your father. Both your parents really." He held out his right hand.

Harry hesitated infinitesimally, then raised his own in answer. "Thank you, sir. It's very nice to meet you."

The hand took his in a light grip, then startled him into a stumble by tugging slightly. Harry fell forward, and found himself engulfed by the

man's arms, pressed, though not painfully, and surrounded by warm cloth that smelled a little like fresh laundry, and a little like Professor Sprout's greenhouses -- extraordinarily *alive*. He forced himself to relax in the grip, wondering, as he waited for the pressure to become painful or for the first blow to fall, what he had done wrong. Was it stating pleasure in meeting the man, when obviously he should be -- and was -- horrified at his emergence from the flame, clearly marking him as magical?

"It is *good* to see you again," the man murmured in his ear, then released him, rising from the knee he'd dropped to. Harry looked back uncertainly.

"Is your news urgent, Remus?" the headmaster asked.

"Not terribly," he replied, eyes not leaving Harry as he absently answered the question.

"Then stay for dinner, my boy, and report in the evening. For now, why don't you spend a bit of time getting to know Harry? Unless you have some other commitment this afternoon, of course."

"I--" the man looked torn, but finally sighed. "I can't. If I disappear for more than an hour or so, questions will start to be asked."

"Very well, then. Harry, would you be so kind as to guide Mr. Lupin to Professor McGonagall? I'll summon the others while you're at it," he added to Mr. Lupin after Harry's quick affirmative. He nodded gratefully. "Thank you. I'm sorry I can't stay longer."

"What must be, must be," the headmaster replied with a twinkling smile. "Off with you both now. I'll see you at dinner, Harry, although if you have need of me before then, you're always welcome."

"Yes, sir, thank you."

"Sounds good," Remus added. "Lead the way, then, Harry."

"Yes, sir," he agreed softly, turning to lead him out of the office.

"I wonder if I could ask you a favor, Harry?" the man asked gravely as they emerged from the staircase and passed the gargoyle.

"Yes, Mr. Lupin," he quickly assured him. "Of course."

"I wonder if you would be willing to call me Remus? Every time I heard you say 'sir' or 'Mr. Lupin', I can hear James and Lily laughing at me."

Harry froze for an instant. "I--" he broke off uncertainly.

"Never mind," the man murmured, lifting one hand apologetically. "Don't if you'd rather not. I'm just another stranger, after all. Do whatever's the most comfortable for you."

Mind whirling, Harry continued down the hall, trying to figure out the right answer. Adults outside of family, he was to call by the appropriate titles of respect at all times. But to disobey a direct order – or at least a direct request? He finally swallowed hard, and then murmured, "I can do that, Remus."

The look he received in return took his breath away. It was the look he'd been craving for two years, ever since the first time he saw it. There was a brooch that Aunt Petunia had fallen in love with, but when she convinced herself that she could afford it, the shopkeeper had informed her that not only had it already been sold, but that it was a handmade, one-of-a-kind piece that he was unable to get another of. She had been incredibly disappointed. But a few weeks later was her birthday, and she'd opened her gift from Dudley to find the brooch. And she'd looked at Dudley with exactly that expression. The surprise and the pleasure both so deep and strong that Harry could have gotten lost in them and never wanted anything more. He'd dreamed ever since then that some day she might look at him like that. Perhaps when he proved that he could be good, that he had *become* good, she would be that surprised, that happy, with him. He fought desperately to hide the dull ache that seeing it now, knowing he didn't deserve it, caused him. It wasn't real, he reminded himself. Just another attempt at tricking him. What made that look so amazing was that it was rooted in joy, but also in love, and Remus couldn't love him. Nobody but the Dursleys could. He knew that. He *knew it*. But he was still tempted to let himself believe that it could have some

thread of reality in it. He forced a slight smile, since it was expected of him, and turned into a smaller corridor. Tapping the brick that opened a passage, he waited for it to slide smoothly open, revealing a dark corridor beyond.

The man behind him chuckled, and he looked up, uncertainly.

"You found one of the secret passageways, huh?" the man asked, smiling.

Harry cocked his head slightly to one side. "I was told to explore the castle," he explained.

The smile grew slightly, and Remus nodded. "Ah, then it was nothing less than your *duty* to find the passages?"

"Yes, si -- Remus," he corrected himself quickly.

"But of course, there's no need to mention having found them to anyone who doesn't specifically tell you about them," the man continued, eyes sparkling. "Or show them to anyone who doesn't."

Harry had long since stopped being surprised at his inability to understand the reasons behind the instructions he was sometimes given. He simply accepted them. "As you say," he agreed with a nod, obediently stepping through the door as Remus waved him ahead, followed him, and closed the door behind them.

"So, what do you think of Hogwarts so far, Harry? Are you going to be taking classes in September?"

"Yes, Remus," he said, "but not like the other students."

"What do you mean?"

"The Sorting Hat wasn't able to place me yet, so Professor Dumbledore is having me take some general classes and share some others with first years. But I'm not going to really take classes like one of the real students."

He could feel the man's eyes studying him thoughtfully despite the darkness of the passageway. Finally, Remus said, "I see. Well, that could be for the best. I understand that over the years some students who have been sorted early have been given a pretty hard time for being younger than anyone else. It doesn't seem like a year should make so much difference, but it does, sometimes. What is he having you study?"

"Reading and writing, mathematics, history, Latin, herbology, defense against the dark arts, and potions."

At the last word, Remus stumbled slightly. "Potions," he repeated, regaining his balance. "With Professor Snape?"

"Yes, sir."

There was a long moment of silence as they reached the end of the passage, and Harry reached up to open the doorway, but paused when a hand touched his shoulder. He froze, waiting.

"There has been..." the man hesitated, then started again. "Professor Snape is a good man, Harry. He's very honest, very loyal, very brave. But he never got on well with your father and myself and our other friends, and it is ... it's possible that he won't be terribly kind to you because of old, remembered wrongs. It's not fair that he would hold our behavior against you, but it is possible that he will. If so, try not to hate him, Harry. He's been through a lot, and more of it than I care to admit was our fault. And he's truly a master of his art – impatient and easily angered, but incredibly skilled. He's not always a good teacher, but if you put your mind to learning from him, you can learn a great deal."

Harry waited, horrified that someone could think he might *hate* someone, as though *he* could possibly look down on another, but he couldn't possibly interrupt. When Remus finally fell silent, he said quickly, "I don't hate Professor Snape."

"You've had some dealings with him already?"

"Yes, sir. He came to pick me up from home, and I stayed in his rooms my first week here. Then he gave me a name for my owl," he added, listing all the interactions he could think of.

A startled smile turned up Remus's lips and his voice shook slightly as he repeated, "He named your owl?"

"Yes, sir. I was very grateful."

"Then please, disregard what I said. Apparently it was unnecessary, and I hope it won't change how you feel about him now. Shall we continue on?"

"Yes, Remus," he agreed, opening the door, and ushering them both through it. They were fairly close to Professor McGonagall's office, and Harry moved quickly through the halls until he reached it, knowing that in the unlikely event that she wasn't there, she would have left a note indicating where she could be found. He stopped at the door, and then looked uncertainly up at the man he was guiding.

Remus smiled reassuringly down at him, and stepped forward to knock lightly on the door.

"Enter," Professor McGonagall's clipped tones called from beyond it.

Harry settled himself to wait for further instructions, but a light hand on his back indicated that he was go go in as well. Professor McGonagall looked up and then a small smile fleetingly touched her lips before moving on to linger in her eyes.

"Remus! I see that you have renewed your acquaintance with Mr. Potter."

"And was beyond pleased to do so," the man agreed. "Sadly, I can't stay with him for long. I have a report to give, and then I must be on my way. But Albus had us fetch you in person so Harry and I could have at least a little while to get to know each other."

"A good thought," she agreed. "Was your test interrupted for it, Harry?" she added, turning to the boy as she gathered up her papers and neatenened them, before rising to her feet.

"No, ma'am. I finished just before he arrived."

Her gaze flicked over to the clock, then back, surprised. "Had you? You must have made very good time, then. You passed, I assume?"

"Yes, ma'am," he agreed.

"What was the test?" Remus asked.

"Learning his way about the castle," she explained. "Albus made a map for him, but he can't very well keep it once the students come. So we wanted to be sure that he'd figured out how to get around."

"Ah," he murmured, eyes twinkling. "Well, he seems to have done fairly well at that."

"Yes," she agreed, casting one more sweeping glance over her desk to ensure that all was in order and nodding her satisfaction. "Well, let us be off, then."

This time, she led the way, and Remus and Harry followed, Remus's eyes sparkling at some private joke. "What shall you do this afternoon, then, Harry, since your test is out of the way?" Professor McGonagall asked him.

"I don't know, ma'am. Nobody's said."

"Why don't you ask Madam Hooch if she'd be willing to spot you for a while as you take a few loops about the Great Hall? You haven't had a chance go fly in the past week or two, have you?" she asked.

Harry's heart sank even as it leapt. He wanted to fly -- but that was the whole problem with it. "Yes, ma'am. I can do that."

"The Great Hall?" Remus asked blankly. "Last time James did that, he got a week's detention!"

"And it was only James, wasn't it?" the transfigurations professor asked, a slight smile on her thin lips. "You, of course, were nowhere near at the time!"

"Well, of course not!" the man replied, "I wouldn't be caught dead flaunting school rules like that."

"Nor alive, of course. It is still against the rules, but Harry's case is special. He can't go outside, you see, and it would be a pity to curtail his flying altogether."

Immediately concern overwhelmed the amusement in the younger man's eyes. "Can't go-- Do the Dea--"

"No, no, nothing like that. His presence here is known, but we've had no sign of interest beyond what is to be expected. We've had nobody testing our wards, thus far. But -- well, I'll explain at greater length later, but the briefest form of the explanation is that Harry suffers from acute agoraphobia."

Remus blinked, looking back at Harry, then turning back to stare at Professor McGonagall. "He-- But--" he started, then cut himself off, taking Harry's hand with a reassuring smile. "Well, it hardly matters right now. Do you like flying, Harry?"

"Yes, very much," he admitted, knowing that he wasn't going to be punished for the admission, and hating that knowledge.

"Think you'll be on your house team in a couple years? Whichever house you get into?"

"I don't know, Remus."

This time, Professor McGonagall's smile was a bit wider. "Oh, he will be. First year, most likely, and I can only hope that it's Gryffindor that gets to fight for the dispensation to *let* him fly first year."

"Really? You must be good," he said to Harry.

The boy dropped his gaze, the intonation was all wrong for the statement. Amused, proud, joking even, rather than the angry, disappointed order it ought to be.

Professor McGonagall nodded sharply. "He is. Madam Hooch took him and some other children up for a game of dodgeball on his

birthday, and Harry, here, earned thirty-two stripes his first game. Ten Spudgers flying at the end," she added reminiscently. "Wish I'd gotten to see it -- Xiomara was kind enough to let me watch her memory, though."

"Thirty-two?" Remus asked blankly, amusement giving way to shock.

Harry hung his head as Professor McGonagall firmly repeated, "Thirty-two. An incredible showing. But here we are. Candy corn. Harry, you run off and find Madam Hooch, please," she finished, as the gargoyle leapt out of the way.

"Yes, ma'am," he agreed.

Remus dropped to one knee and set both hands on Harry's shoulders. "It was truly wonderful to meet you, Harry. I look forward to doing so again."

"Thank you, sir," he said, not looking into those serious eyes that held so much that they shouldn't. "It was good to meet you, too."

The man pulled him into another gentle hug, then watched as he walked off down the hall to find Madam Hooch. Harry didn't hear the gargoyle jump back into its normal position until shortly after he'd turned the corner and lost the prickling sensation of eyes on his back.

The flight was, as always, everything he hoped, which made it everything he feared. He held the miniature broom gently as he returned to his rooms afterwards, fighting back tears as he contemplated just how mad his family would be if they had been watching him -- and just how much he deserved that anger.

"You could just tell them that you don't like it."

Harry's head jerked up to look at the speaker, and found that he was standing before his own door, and that Augustus was looking at him wistfully. "I'm sorry, Augustus," Harry said politely. "I don't understand."

"You always look so sad when you come back from flying," the child said. "If you just told them that you don't like it, they wouldn't make you."

"But I do like it," Harry stated.

Augustus frowned in confusion. "That doesn't make sense," he stated. "Doing things you like doesn't make you sad. That's what liking things is all about. If it makes you sad, you can't like it, because if you liked it, doing it would make you happy." He shrugged in irritation and flipped a stray hair out of his eyes. "I can't say it right, but it's true!" He scowled at Harry. "I just don't like you being sad."

"I'm sorry," he repeated.

The portrait sighed and swung open, and Harry moved through it.

"Have a good evening, Augustus."

"Thanks," the boy said, offering a quick smile that didn't quite reach his troubled eyes, then closed himself.

Once the portrait was finally closed, Harry sagged. His breath caught in his throat as he knelt on the hard stone of his floor, staring down at the toy broom in his hand. Such a little thing to be so very evil. Even as a toy it was beautiful, the lines smooth and clean, the lettering along its side a lovely script. Even the grain of the wood, shrunk down so far he had to squint to see it, was lovely. Terrified by what he was doing, he set it down on the floor and then, slowly and deliberately, rose to his feet, placed the heel of his right foot on it and transferred all of his weight onto that heel. Then spun. The sound of cracking wood was almost physically painful, but he welcomed that pain, knowing he deserved it on a very deep level. Deserved far, far worse. Finally he picked up the splintered remains, staring at the little pile, and, furiously biting back the tears prickling his eyes, hid the scraps behind Neville's plant. He had never in his life deliberately destroyed something before, and that had been the most frightening part. He shouldn't break things -- even magical things, he suspected. It was not for him to decide what deserved to exist and what did not. After all, he didn't deserve it himself. But the broom had been more incredible

each time he rode it, and he couldn't bear to continue facing it, again and again.

After breakfast on Monday morning, Harry cautiously moved through the halls making his way to the DADA classroom, where he knocked lightly on the door.

"Yes, yes, come!"

The irritated snap drew him through the door and he closed it softly behind him, and then turned to Professor Mungrove, waiting uncertainly.

Hazel eyes glared down at him. "I haven't the faintest idea what Professor Dumbledore is expecting us to do with you this week," she stated. "And to be honest, I'm not terribly pleased to have my last week of freedom suddenly become significantly less free. But he's the boss, so here you are. However, since this is my first -- and hopefully only -- year to be teaching here, and my predecessor's notes and lesson plans are utterly useless, I also simply do not have the time to entertain you. It's not personal, but I have work to do."

"Yes, ma'am," he said softly, waiting to be locked away until he was needed for something. His eyes flicked about the room in search of a cupboard, but found nothing.

"Okay, then. Look over that bookcase over there, pick yourself out something to read, and sit reading it. Quietly. Got it?"

"Yes, ma'am," he repeated, moving over to the indicated case. It was perhaps half a meter wide and held three shelves of neatly packed books. Dropping to his knees before it, his breath caught in dismay as he began to read the titles. *A Little Book of Useful Counterhexes. Recognizing Dark Creatures. Dark Dreams and Other Fae Powers. Ten Simple Shields and When to Use Them.* Finally, his gaze landed on a slim volume entitled, *Without Your Wand: Non-Magical Protection and Defense.*

With a silent sigh of relief, he pulled the book from its place, settled down on his knees, and lifted the book to his face to begin reading. Then blinked as his eyes refused to focus on the words. Uncertainly,

he moved it away, and was relieved when the words focused. He still wasn't used to the change the glasses made to his vision. Quietly, he began to read, only to be interrupted a few minutes later by a sharp, "Mr. Potter, *what* do you think you're doing?"

"Reading, ma'am?" he offered tentatively, not sure what he'd done wrong.

"If you've picked a book, go sit at a desk, don't loll about on the floor!"

Startled, he rose smoothly to his feet. "Sorry, ma'am," he apologized, seating himself at the nearest desk. He waited until she turned back to her papers, before once more beginning to read. His back didn't ache as much from sitting as it had at first, but he still preferred kneeling. It was more comfortable, but it was also what he was *supposed* to do. It wasn't right for him to be on the furniture. But he had long practice in not letting discomfort, physical or mental, distract him, so he continued carefully reading the book.

Finally, Professor Mungrove rose to her feet and moved towards him. Harry carefully relaxed his muscles in preparation for a blow, but she merely said, "That's it, then. Lunch time. What did you pick?" She took the book from him without awaiting his response, one finger slipping between the pages at the point he'd reached. She studied the cover for a long moment, then turned to look at Harry from below lowered brows. He held himself still beneath her gaze. "Good choice," she said at last. "But odd."

When it became apparent that she was expecting some response, Harry ventured, "Ma'am?"

"Most muggle-raised would immediately go for the most overtly magical book they could find," she said thoughtfully. Her tone made Harry wonder if he'd been wrong to speak -- she sounded more like she was talking to herself than to him. Abruptly, she stuck a slip of paper between the leaves to mark his spot, and reinserted the book onto the shelf. "You can continue on Friday," she stated. "Go to lunch."

"Yes, ma'am," he acknowledged, slipping out of the desk to leave the room.

After lunch he went to Professor Dumbledore's office for what would be, in the coming weeks, a history lesson. It proved far more nerve-racking than Professor Mungrove's time, as the headmaster immediately began talking to him about how he was settling in and how he enjoyed Hogwarts and how Hedwig and his Witch's Wode were doing, and if he was happy with Augustus as his portrait-door. Harry did the best he could to answer as they would expect him to, and gradually he relaxed a bit as he saw the hint of hard concern behind the twinkling eyes slowly soften and dissolve. The look vanished almost entirely when Fawkes left his perch in the corner to settle dry-eyed on Harry's shoulder, crooning softly as the boy scratched him behind the crest.

Although he was almost certain that he had made steps towards convincing the headmaster that he didn't know he was bad, Harry found the whole time extremely stressful. Behind their sparkle, the old man's eyes were sharp and his questions just the ones the Dursleys had warned him to avoid. Questions about his family, his life at home, his feelings. The hour seemed to last an eternity, and leaving was a relief.

But if his hour with the headmaster was uncomfortable, the following hour was actually painful. Professor McGonagall met him in her classroom with her desk full of picture albums which were, in turn, full to overflowing with silently moving photographs, mostly of old students. She flipped through them, pointing out one here, pausing over one there, with a quiet stream of commentary about the people in them. And the overwhelming majority of the pictures she showed him were of his parents. Together and separate, alone and with friends and with teachers, there seemed to be a never ending supply of them, from the earliest ones when they were barely older than him, to the most recent, in which they were adults, or nearly so, and leaving the school for good.

In one of the first, a little boy with short black hair in wild disarray, turned to wink one hazel eye through his glasses (all of which let Harry recognized him before Professor McGonagall named him: James Potter. Bully. Alcoholic. Wizard. Freak.) at his audience before sneaking up behind a redhead, her hair vibrant against the black of her school robes, and casting a tickling charm directly into her ribs.

The girl squirmed and spun about, showing a silent squeal, her emerald eyes narrowed and flashing with fury (Lily Potter. Spoiled Brat. Whore. Witch. Freak.) as she snapped a counterspell. The boy's eyes widened in comic dismay at how easily she'd rid herself of his hex, and then he spun and fled, laughing as she gave chase.

In another, a slightly older Lily sat on a bench in a garden, almost hidden within a lilac bush, the clumps of purple and blue flowers shifting slightly in the breeze. At her side sat a tall, pale boy with smooth black hair held back in a neat queue, and a shy smile. ("Professor Snape as a lad," the transfiguration professor commented quietly.) They were bent over a large book spread across both their laps. She was nodding slowly as he pointed out something, his mouth moving rapidly in some complex explanation, looking back and forth between her attentive face and the book as he tried to get something across. Then, suddenly, her face lit with a glow of comprehension, and she touched his shoulder with one hand to get his attention and began to speak excitedly. He nodded enthusiastically and they shared a delighted smile.

Older still, James led three other boys in a strange dance. The first was tall and rugged, with long, black hair hanging about his face and a smile that Harry could barely stand to look at because it seemed to say that he *knew* that he was bad. Knew it and reveled in the knowledge. ("Sirius Black. You -- one day you shall hear his story. But not today, Harry.") The second one was brown-haired and thin, wearing old robes and an air of quiet contentment deeper than the job on the others. ("Remus, of course, who you met just yesterday. He was never happier than when surrounded by his friends.") The last was a well-fed blond boy who was always a quarter step behind the others, all of his attention on them, trying to be just like them. Harry felt a surge of sympathy for the awkward boy, knowing how hard it was to behave like everyone expected, all the while knowing that you are nothing like them or like they expect you to be. ("Peter Pettigrew. A good hearted lad, and a good friend to the end.") Each had his hands on the hips of the boy before him as they swayed forward in time with James's hands, which spun about each other. Every few steps, one of his hands would lift, pointing up and out, and all the boys kicked out with the leg on that side. After a few steps, the other side would lift. As Professor McGonagall chuckled over the picture,

more boys flooded into it, joining the lengthening line, swaying and laughing and kicking.

About the same age, Lily, with her hair tied tightly back, stood before James, hands on hips, jaw outthrust, head tilted back to look him in the eye as she spoke. And he stood there, first grinning broadly, but slowly the grin turned to something approaching remorse. He started to speak, but one of her hands clenched into a fist and whipped out, striking him with enough force to knock his head back. She snapped out one more phrase, then spun about, surreptitiously raising one hand to dash a tear from her eye as she stalked away. He watched her go, hand absently exploring his bruised jaw, staring after her with a look of wonder and something else that Harry didn't quite recognize but which hadn't been on his face in any of the previous pictures.

"I think that's the moment James started to fall in love with Lily," Professor McGonagall said softly, smiling down at the picture. Harry looked up at her, uncertainly, hoping he'd misheard. He knew his father was a bully and a freak, but to fall in love with someone because they attacked him? But then, perhaps he wasn't all bad? Perhaps he knew he was bad and recognized the punishment as a sign that she would help him get better? "She never got so angry when he picked on her," she continued, "but if he dared lay a hand on one of her friends she was enraged. Merlin, she would have taken on a basilisk single-handed to protect someone she cared about, and I think that was the moment James figured that out -- and he wanted to be one of the people she would do anything to protect. Not that he wanted to be protected, mind. James was no coward. But he wanted to be loved as only Lily loved -- with all her heart and soul, loyal to death and beyond."

She turned the page again, then stopped as the clock on her desk clicked softly. Looking over at it, she sighed. "Well, we're out of time, and even now when school hasn't actually started, I daresay Professor Snape will be upset if you're late. Off with you, Harry, and we can look at some more pictures when you come back tomorrow morning, if you like."

"Yes, ma'am," he agreed, trying to feign excitement as he realized that part of who they were pretending he was a boy who had never

known his parents and who would believe whatever they said about them and be eager to hear more. But every picture hurt and every word stung him. Reminding himself that he deserved the pain, he added, "Thank you, ma'am," and obediently headed down to the potions classroom, where he was to have his math lessons. His last stop for the day.

Professor Snape barely looked up from the potion he was working on as Harry entered the room. He was actually in a small private lab just off the potions classroom, and as Harry entered, he waved towards a stool, and snapped, "Sit. There. Don't move and don't make a sound. I need to concentrate."

Harry took the seat he was motioned towards, and held himself perfectly still and silent, watching attentively as the man chopped and stirred, occasionally leaving the potion to clean a cauldron, mortar and pestle, blade, or cutting board, then hurrying back to it once more. He showed no further sign of noticing Harry, who slowly relaxed on the stool, relieved that this period at least he wasn't to be tested or attacked. Once he understood the pattern of the potions master's movements, it took an effort of will to stay put, and not to move forward and clean the knife after he had used it to chop the squashy red things that apparently couldn't be mixed with anything else. To take the cauldron after the third time it was used and set aside, but not before, and scour it, put boiling water in it, and let it sit while the next one was used three times, then moving the next one to clean and setting the current one behind the one Professor Snape had moved on to. But he had been told to be still, so he was still, even as he watched carefully, seeing how he could make himself useful were he allowed to move.

The two hours ended, and he continued to sit, quietly awaiting further instructions as the professor continued his work. At last, he cleaned out a cauldron for the last time, stretched, rolled his shoulders, and turned. He froze as he saw Harry. "What are you still doing here?"

"I'm sorry, sir," Harry said quickly, responding to the irritation in the voice, then internalizing a wince at the annoyance the apology brought to the man's dark eyes. "You told me not to move, sir."

"Well of course when your time's up you can leave. So *leave!*" he snapped.

"Yes, sir. Sorry, sir," Harry murmured, before fleeing the room.

That night at dinner, Harry ate quietly, responding when he was asked a direct question. Just before he left, though, Professor Flitwick called him aside. "Mr. Potter, I was trying to come up with some way to entertain you this week in our meetings, and suddenly it occurred to me that so far nobody has shown you how to do anything with your practice wand! I should have done so before, but time is so very short just before school starts, you know. Bring it with you tomorrow, and we'll get started," he said excitedly.

"Yes, sir," Harry acknowledged.

"Oh, this will be fun!" Flitwick exclaimed in delight, rubbing his hands together gleefully. "Goodnight, Harry, I'll see you in the morning."

"Yes, sir," he repeated, watching as the little man turned and bounced away, seeming to be counting something off on his fingers.

Feeling his shoulders begin to droop, Harry deliberately straightened them, and returned to his room to get ready for bed. He felt like the real test would begin tomorrow. The first time he really had to deceive them, had to do poorly at something.

"Put me on, Harry."

Harry dropped his gaze to his hands where he was scrubbing at an old stain on the floor and scrubbed harder, trying not to hear the hat.

"Harry."

His hands stilled, but he still didn't look up.

The voice turned suddenly harsh and angry, strangely punctuated by a sad warbling cry from the phoenix, "Put me on, Harry! Now!"

Like a puppet on a string, he rose to his feet, scrubbrush falling from one limp hand, and crossed the room, lifted the hat, and placed it on his head, unable to disobey that tone when it wasn't countering one of his direct orders. He closed his eyes as the fabric covered them, and clenched his jaw against the sudden onslaught of memories from the past week. There was some good, of course, Professor Snape had stopped telling him to stay still, and after studying the man for a while to ensure that he understood the patterns properly, he'd begun cleaning and organizing as the man worked. Professor Snape hadn't even noticed at first, until the third time he reached for a cauldron that shouldn't have been there and had it exactly where he wanted it to be. He'd paused, staring at it like he hadn't seen it before, turned to look at the pile of filled beakers, then turned back to the clean cauldrons, then looking at Harry as if he'd forgotten he was there. Harry had waited to see if he'd gotten it wrong, but at long last the potions master had simply gone back to work, occasionally laying his measuring gaze on the boy as he moved through his self-imposed tasks, watching for the slightest mistake. Eventually, though, he'd turned his full attention back to the brewing of his potions, which Harry had taken as a good sign. And when he'd switched potions, and Harry had moved to the background to watch for the pattern, Professor Snape had snapped orders as to what to do when, clearly irritated that he didn't already know, and which Harry had quickly obeyed, managing to silence his instinctive apology. He had assisted throughout the rest of his math and potions pre-classes, slowly falling into a quiet rhythm, neither speaking unless Snape was changing something in the routine he wanted Harry to perform. Harry enjoyed the quiet work, doing his tasks to the best of his ability.

And there was the moment of relief when he was reading in Professor Mungrove's classroom when he reached a discussion of looking through illusions and found that it wasn't actually magic. That muggles had been taught to do it just as well as wizards.

But those good moments hardly balanced out the horrible talks with the headmaster, and the seemingly infinite supply of photographs brought out by Professor McGonagall, much less the lessons with Professor Flitwick. The hat focused particularly on those, pausing frequently on the teacher and his increasingly confused expressions.

"He's figuring it out," he commented.

Harry, watching his own memories with the hat, bit his lip but didn't answer.

"You have, potentially, eight years of trickery to last out, and Professor Flitwick is starting to figure out in only five days that you're faking inability. It's not going to work the way you're doing it, Harry." When Harry didn't answer, the hat continued, "It's hard to convincingly fail to learn something. Especially when you've already proven that you're intelligent and hard-working. You're not convincing him, Harry."

"I have to," he finally muttered.

"Did he look convinced to you?"

The boy remained stubbornly silent.

"Afraid to admit to a flaw? You are failing to deceive him, do you deny it?"

At the sudden accusation, the boy's eyes opened and his shoulders straightened. "No, sir."

"That's right," the voice murmured, gentle once more. "Here's the trick of it, Harry. It's been proven again and again. You can only effectively pretend to be bad at something if you really are bad at it -- which we both know you're not capable of remaining for any length of time -- or if you're very good at it, indeed. The only way you can hope to convince them you're bad at it -- and believe me when I say that Professor Flitwick is the least of your problems: if Professor McGonagall had been there with you, she'd have confronted you already -- is to not only learn what he's teaching, but to master it. So that you can know just what tiny thing to change to make it fail. Pulling your flick short by just a fraction of a centimeter. Swishing just a trifle too far. Incanting with just a hint of a stress on the wrong syllable. All mistakes that are hard to pinpoint if you're subtle enough, and even harder to prove are deliberate. But you can only understand how close you can get without getting it right if you know how to get it right, Harry. And if you continue bumbling as you have been --

pronunciation all wrong when he's quite aware that you have perfectly good ears, wand movement backwards when he's seen how graceful you can be -- they'll see through you in no time, Harry. And then, they'll demand answers."

Harry was too shocked by even the concept of deliberately learning, mastering magical skills to put it into words. But the hat lifted the thoughts directly from his head.

"Is it worse to learn magic or to give away your charade, Harry?" the hat asked, voice soft. "You know what giving yourself away means, don't you? It would mean they'd start asking questions. And once they start asking questions, once they realize how many questions there are to ask, it's only a matter of time before they find out everything, Harry. I'm not the only one around here who can read minds, you know. If you give them cause to do so, you'll be left with no secrets at all. And do you know what will happen once they've opened up your secrets?"

"No," Harry whispered.

"Yes, you do, Harry. Of course you do. What will happen?"

"They'll try to turn me against the my family. They'll try to use everything I care about and everything I know against me to twist my mind into believing them."

"Oh, they'll do that. But it's more than that, and you know it. What else will they do?"

"Hurt them," Harry admitted, voice cracking. "They'll hurt my family, won't they?"

"Once they see what they've done to you? Oh yes. They'll hurt them. So it's up to you, Harry. Do you protect your family by learning what you are not supposed to learn? Not using it, of course, because that would be wrong, but simply learning how to use it so that you can effectively pretend not to know? Think, Harry! As long as you're using the practice wand, nothing you do is actually magic. Not if you do it for Professor Flitwick, and not if you learn to do it on your own so that you can effectively convince him that you're failing to learn. So if you

can learn how to do magic without actually doing any magic, so that once you get a real wand you won't *have* to do magic -- and by doing so you protect your family, how can you even consider doing otherwise?"

"I can't learn to do magic. I have to be bad at it," Harry stated.

"You have to convince them that you are useless, is that not so?"

"Yes," he whispered.

"Are they more likely to believe that you are useless if they think you can't do magic, or if they think that for some reason you're deliberately refusing to learn magic? Which is more likely to make them angry, Harry? Are you supposed to make them angry?"

"No," he whispered. "They're very dangerous and they could hurt my family if they knew that they tried to prepare me to resist them."

"That's right, Harry. Do you want to risk your family like that? Is that really what they'd want?"

"They don't want me to learn magic!"

"Of course they don't, Harry. But would they rather you know how to do it, intellectually, and have nobody know, have them safe and you safe from the wizards prying further and further into your secrets, or would they rather have you outright defiant, showing the wizards that you could learn but that you refuse? Do you think they'll take defiance well, Harry?"

At the first mention of defiance, a shudder ran through Harry's body and his breathing quickened a bit.

"You're afraid, aren't you?" the hat asked, a note of discovery in its voice.

"Yes," Harry admitted.

"You're afraid that if you learn the magic, you'll be tempted to use it. That you'll realize that your family lied to you all these years and that

it isn't wrong or unnatural. That if you use it, you'll have to reconsider everything you believe."

"No!" he gasped, shocked.

"Then if you're firm in your beliefs, if learning the mechanics behind it can't tempt you, what is so dangerous about it, Harry? What's so dangerous that it's worth risking your family?"

"I'm not supposed to learn," he whimpered, tears beading on his eyelashes, hidden beneath the hat.

"You're also not supposed to put your family at risk. *Think*, Harry. Is it worse for you to risk temptation, or to risk the lives and well-being of your aunt and uncle?"

"They don't want me to learn magic," he whispered, almost pleadingly.

"Do those platitudes make you feel better?" the hat demanded. "Will your family be pleased with you when the headmaster takes you with him to confront them, and says he knows all of what they've said and done to you? Will they look at you and say it's okay, since at least you didn't let them teach you magic? Will they forgive you, Harry? Will they?"

Harry threw the hat from him, and buried his head in his knees, curling his arms around his head in a vain attempt to block out the words.

Suddenly the voice was gentle once more, soothing, but projecting easily through his arms, as easily as if it spoke directly into his mind. "It doesn't have to be like that, Harry. You can learn but never use the lessons. I can teach you how to deceive them, Harry. But only if you let me teach you. I can't show you how to do it wrong without you learning how to do it right. It won't *work*. It's difficult, I know. Making decisions with nobody you trust to guide you. But think of what your uncle would tell you if he was here. What comes first? Protecting Dudley and Petunia from the magic, or protecting yourself from the possibility of temptation?"

"Protecting them," he whispered, voice dull and drained of emotion.

"That's right. They have no defense against magic. You're the only one who can protect them, and you can protect them by doing this. By learning to feign inability better. And as long as you use the practice wand you're not *doing* magic. You're *using* a magical item, but it's equally magical whether you use it or not, you're not making magic in any way by learning with it, Harry. You're just protecting your family. Take out your practice wand, Harry."

Reluctantly, his hand reached into the pocket of the robes he had been provided earlier in the week, and pulled forth the stick.

"That's right, Harry. Good. Now repeat after me. *Wingardium leviosa!*"

Harry sat quietly in his seat between the headmaster and Professor McGonagall's empty spot, and tried not to show how nervous he was. There was less talk than usual around the table, and an air of expectation. The headmaster was beaming about cheerfully, Professor Flitwick practically squirming in his seat with excitement, Professor Snape glaring furiously at the door, and the other teachers in various other attitudes of eagerness and distress.

The huge wooden doors opened, and Harry's eyes widened as the children started to enter -- and just kept coming. More and more of them, talking and laughing as they flooded into the huge chamber and split away from each other, separating to the four tables to select their seats. He had never been able to imagine the room full, and as wave after wave of students surged through the door he could hardly comprehend the number of them. Some of them looked up to the head table to smile or wave at teachers, but once their eyes landed on Harry they tended to stare, elbow friends, and point him out to them as well. He swallowed around a thickness in his throat and wished he could disappear. Then silenced an apology that nearly voiced itself at the wish for something that was so obviously magical.

A hand lightly touched his shoulder, and he turned quickly toward the headmaster, biting back the instinctive apology when he saw a sparkling smile.

"Don't forget to breathe," the headmaster whispered to him, hardly moving his mouth.

"Yes, sir," he acknowledged, drawing in breath and forcing it back out again.

A blue eye winked at him, and the headmaster turned back towards the stream of students.

Finally, the children stopped coming, and *still* the tables weren't full. But then the door opened again, and Professor McGonagall led a long line of younger children into the room, a three legged stool held in one hand and the Sorting Hat in the other. She motioned sternly for

the children to stay where they were, and moved forward several steps, setting down the stool and placing the hat atop it. Trying not to focus on the hat, Harry's eyes flickered about the room and found everyone else staring at it, most with expectation, although some of the line of students standing by the door looked more confused than excited. Those ones looked all the more surprised when the hat shuddered slightly, and then opened its rip of a mouth, and began to speak -- or, actually, to sing.

Another year has passed and gone,
Another has arrived.
And changes come, as changes do,
But still old ways survive.
And so a hat will show the way
To what house you'll call home,
What friends will be your closest friends,
And what traits your actions show.

If loyalty and diligence
Mean more to you than luck
If industry you insist on
And mere talent's not enough
Then you shall very likely find
Yourself in Hufflepuff!

If you prefer to bypass work
Through cunning and quick mind
Approaching problems not just from front
But also from behind
No better place for you, you'll find,
Than amongst shrewd Slytherins!

Or possibly you will prefer
To face all things head on
Rushing in to danger and
For honor risking more
If this is so, the house for you
Is surely Gryffindor!

If wit and cleverness do hold
The best place in your heart
And dreams of knowledge
Drive you on, and knowing is your part,
The house of learning will be home,
So you'll be Ravenclaw!

So step on up and put me on,
I always answer best.
Each house is right for some of you
And this is not a test!
Feel no fear, just let me look,
And I shall do the rest!

Harry jerked slightly as everyone in the hall began clapping and shouting at the end of the song, his eyes flickering about to try to figure out what was going on, until he realized that they were cheering -- showing appreciation like Uncle Vernon and Dudley did when their favorite team scored in football. It seemed like an awfully strange thing to do just now. The hat tipped its point to each of the four tables, and then fell still, waiting, and the room slowly quieted.

Professor McGonagall stepped up to it, holding a long roll of parchment, and looked sternly out over the new students. "When I call your name, you will put on the hat and sit on the stool to be sorted," she stated. She spread the roll before her, cleared her throat, and called out, "Arlington, Edward."

Another shiver ran through Harry's shoulders as he watched a tall boy with black hair and gray eyes move nervously forward, pick up the hat, climb up to perch on the stool facing the head table, and set it on his head, folding his hands in his lap as the hat drooped down over his eyes. After a few moments, the hat shouted out, "Ravenclaw!"

The boy took off the hat as the students under the blue and bronze eagle banner burst into loud cheers, and the boy's uncertainty gave way to pleasure as he hopped off the stool and raced over to them, clearly enjoying the warm welcome. A tremor ran through Harry, and he forced himself to relax as his hands began to clench.

“Don't worry, Harry.”

He looked over at the headmaster, surprised at the gentle reassurance, and received a bright smile.

“Next year it will be you up there, and the welcome will be all the louder, since they'll already know you.”

Harry swallowed heavily, his stomach churning at the horrific image. “Yes, sir,” he acknowledged, trying to at least keep the dread from his tone, since he was sure that faking enthusiasm for such a possibility was far beyond his abilities.

Another twinkling smile, and the headmaster turned his attention back to the ongoing sorting. Harry watched as the students were divided up, going to the four tables where they were welcomed with cheers and occasional shaken hands or pats on the back. Most of the children were sorted quickly, within seconds of hat touching head. The longer ones took a minute or a little less, although even that was enough time that the other kids began fidgeting, their attention wandering. And, most often, their attention seemed to wander back to him, the hat's longest pauses punctuated by whispers between students, their eyes locked on Harry until their attention was drawn back to the hat by a shouted house name.

At long last, the parade of students came to an end, the tables were finally completely full, and the stool and hat were bundled out of the room. Then Professor McGonagall took her place by Harry's side and the headmaster rose to his feet and extended his hands in a request for silence that was quickly granted. “I know you are all eager to eat, so I shall keep myself brief and share but a few words with you before dinner: Gizmo! Adipose! Myriad! Riffle!

“Thank you!” He resumed his seat, and again the room filled with applause.

Harry looked around uncertainly, watching the students as they cheered and laughed. He was unsettled by the startled delight of the youngest ones as they realized that the tables were no longer empty but for the place settings but were, instead, loaded with platters and bowls of food. Harry reluctantly served himself, and began to eat,

trying not to taste the food, knowing that he shouldn't be able to eat it. He ate it anyways, before any of the teachers along the table could level concerned looks at him, or Professor Dumbledore could heap more food onto his plate in an encouragement to eat more. He watched the students below with a dread fascination, never looking straight at any of them, but still watching as they talked and laughed, shoved each other, and stole food from each others plates. Some of them were staring at him, too, but he kept his eyes off of those ones, knowing better than to meet anyone's eyes.

The meal seemed interminable, dragging on and on, and it seemed like there wasn't a single second in which there wasn't at least one or two people watching him. Harry found it nerve-wracking and exhausting, and had to force himself to steadily eat until his plate was clear of food and the headmaster stopped giving him significant glances to suggest that he pile some more on to it. At last the sounds of cutlery on plates and glasses on tables faded away as everyone finished up. The sounds resumed furiously as the main dishes vanished and were replaced by desserts of every description. Finally, when those, too, had been devoured, the headmaster rose once more.

"Ah, now that you can, perhaps, hear me over the growling of your stomachs, let me inform you of some start-of-term announcements.

"First years should be aware that the forest on the grounds is forbidden to all pupils. Indeed, other years should bear that in mind as well," he added with a chuckle, eyes flickering about the room and pausing on three or four people or clusters of people.

"As usual, no magic should be used between classes in the corridors.

"Quidditch trials will be held in the second week of the term. Anyone interested in playing for their house teams should speak to both Madam Hooch and to your team captain. If you do not know the identify of your captain, I feel certain that anyone in your house can inform you." A quiet laugh moved about the room, and Harry glanced about, trying to figure out what was funny.

"I should like to introduce this year's Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, Professor Mungrove." Scattered applause answered him,

and the woman inclined her head in greeting, looking as though she'd prefer to be anywhere else.

"And last but not least, some of you may have noticed my young guest here," the headmaster added, gesturing to Harry with one hand. The boy forced himself to remain still and relaxed as every eye in the building turned toward him. "This is Harry Potter."

And all of the gazes sharpened. "*Potter?*" he heard someone say.

"*The Harry Potter?*" another demanded.

Harry felt himself shrinking back from all the eyes, and forced himself to stop, dropping his gaze to the table, waiting for whatever was to come.

"Harry is too young to join you as a first year, but had to come early for other reasons. He will be joining the first years in some of their classes, and shall be taking other classes on his own. Harry will not be sorted into a house until next year when he is officially a student, so he will not be placed in any of the dorms, nor will he have an assigned table. He is welcome to sit with any of you, or in his place here at the head table. Understand that he does not yet have a wand, and therefore any use of magic against him will not be tolerated." He paused for a long moment, eyes roving around the room, expression unusually serious as he met the gaze of one student after another.

Then his eyes sparkled again and he grinned widely. "So help him feel at home. You can go to his quarters if you have a specific invitation, although you will still be expected to be back in your own by curfew. Now, some of you are looking a trifle fatigued," he added, with a bland smile at a pair of students who were yawning widely behind their hands, "so I'll send you on your way! Goodnight to you all."

At that, total chaos ensued. Or so it seemed to Harry's eyes. Some students leapt up from their tables and dashed off into the corridors, while others congregated in little groups talking. Still others reached for one last helping of pudding, and the youngest looked around in frightened confusion until a handful of the eldest at each table gathered them together and began speaking to them.

"Prefects," the headmaster explained to Harry when he noticed the boy looking at one such group. "They help the new students settle into their houses-- tell them the password, show them the best ways to reach their dormitories, and explain all the rules and whatnot. You can recognize them by the badge," he added, nodding towards the nearest of the prefects, a Hufflepuff girl with smooth brown hair and a friendly smile, and Harry saw that instead of the normal crest the other students had been wearing, her black and yellow badger had a large P superimposed over it. "If you ever get a bit lost or run into trouble of any kind and can't find a professor, speak to one of the prefects," Professor Dumbledore stated. "They'll help you or get you to someone who can. Don't worry about interrupting them -- that's what they're there for."

"Yes, sir," Harry said softly, wondering if this was some kind of test, how they could possibly believe that he would interrupt someone with his problems as though they had any meaning.

"Good." The headmaster glanced down the line of teachers and staff, who were all still seated, chatting amongst themselves, and then looked down to see the last group of youngsters herded off by their prefect, and smiled. "Well, Harry, what did you think?"

The boy hesitated for a long moment, ill at ease with the unusual question, trying to come up with an acceptable answer. "There are so *many* of them, sir," he finally ventured.

Professor Dumbledore beamed at him. "There are, rather," he admitted. "And all of them terribly interested in you, of course! No way to avoid that, I'm afraid, but they'll calm down, never you fear, and you'll feel less like an animal in a zoo then!"

It took Harry a moment to get the reference, but then he remembered his family having gone to a zoo a couple of years back. Animals were kept in cages and 'habitats', a word his readings for science studies had given him only a vague understanding of, so that people who otherwise would never get to see them could stare at them. He wondered why these people could possibly want to stare at *him*. Surely they would be better pretending that he didn't exist? But, then,

they didn't *want* to be better, he reminded himself, fighting back a shudder at the thought.

As soon as the huge door closed behind the students, Professor Snape rose to his feet, turned, and stalked out of the room, robes swirling about him. A snort from the other end of the table suggested that Professor Mungrove was unimpressed by his theatrics, but she left almost as quickly herself. Several of the other professors followed their example.

A shadow loomed over Harry, and he rose from his feet to turn towards Hagrid, not allowing himself to show any fear. He had no right to be afraid, not even of Hagrid, who was so very large and loud. And he treated Harry strangely, as though he were ... more than normal. More than good. Almost like how Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia treated Dudley when he was sick -- something to be taken care of and treasured and worried about. Harry never knew how to act around the big man -- he always suspected there was more to it than simply tricking him, because surely they couldn't expect him to have that skewed an image of himself? They couldn't possibly think he'd believe this, could they?

"Heya, Harry, how's yer owl? Yeh got enough feed for her?" There was always something a bit abrupt about how he spoke, as though he hadn't decided to actually say the words until they were already half out, and Harry had to still a jump of surprise at the first word, even though he'd known it was coming.

"Yes, sir," he replied politely. "Hedwig is doing well and I have plenty of her food for now, thank you for asking."

"Good then, good then." The huge man paused, and Harry fell very still, waiting. "Yeh come on out an' have some tea with me some day, eh, Harry?"

Harry felt his heart begin to race, and felt a sudden chill all through him as he imagined crossing the great lawn to the groundskeeper's home. "Yes, sir," he acknowledged.

“Not until after you're more comfortable with the sky, Harry,” the headmaster interrupted the conversation gently. “Hagrid meant when you wanted to.”

“Oh, aye, a'course,” Hagrid said quickly, horrified. “Nev'r do nuttin' ya don't wanna, Harry, not fer me, a'least.”

Harry's mouth felt dry and he had to work to not shrink back when the man made another abrupt move to swoop towards him, dropping to one knee in front of him and still towering over the small boy. “I don' always think stuff through enou', Harry, but fer all tha' Fang an' me would love ta have yah over, don' come till yer wanna.”

The boy managed a quick nod and a murmur of, “Yes, sir.” He tried not to think too much about what Uncle Vernon would say at Harry accepting such a statement. But what else could he do?

He waited, holding himself perfectly still, half-expecting one of those huge hands to lash out at him, to punish him for agreeing that he would put his preferences before the instructions of another. Hands even larger than Uncle Vernon's. Finally, the man sighed and said, “Well, guess I'll see yah round, then, eh, Harry?”

“Yes, sir,” he agreed again, waiting until the man walked away and the headmaster cleared his throat before turning to the older man. “Sir?”

“Hagrid cared a great deal about your parents,” Professor Dumbledore said slowly, eyes unusually serious.

“Yes, sir,” Harry acknowledged.

“He cares a great deal for you, you know.”

Harry forced a nod, and waited.

“You do know,” the man hesitated for a moment, then said, “You do know, don't you, Harry, that Hagrid would never hurt you?”

"Yes, sir," he answered promptly, wondering if they were, at last, going to speak honestly about what he was, about why they were treating him so wrongly.

But the headmaster just nodded. "Very well, then. I suppose he takes some getting used to. He is certainly not a small man." He paused, and Harry waited uncertainly to see what was to come. Everyone here had these long pauses that his family almost never used. He hadn't yet been able to work out what they were about, but they made him uncomfortable. "Well, the halls should be cleared out a bit by now," Professor Dumbledore finally said. "Off you go to your rooms -- breakfast is at the usual time tomorrow, of course, but I think it will take a little while for you to get used to having all the students here as well."

"Yes, sir," he repeated, and slipped out of the room. The hallways had emptied out and he didn't see anyone, although he occasionally caught an echo of footsteps or a wisp of laughter from somewhere in the distance. It was nerve-racking after the weeks of quiet, almost more uncomfortable than the obvious presence of so many people had been.

He started hearing a voice as he got close to the corridor his room was in. A strange voice. It was young, he thought, but wasn't really certain, and it somehow changed every few words, the change almost unnoticeable, but not quite. He couldn't make out the words at first, just the pitch and tone, which varied from pleading to cajoling and back again without any pause for breath, just those strange alterations that seemed to heed no pattern. The sound separated into actual words as he got closer.

"C'mon, Auggie, aren't--"

"--we your friends?"

"Aren't we--"

"--the ones who came down--"

"--to visit you--"

--when nobody else had time?"

"Didn't we show you where--"

--that painting--"

--with all the--"

--chocolates was?"

"Didn't we--"

Harry rounded the corner and paused in confusion. It wasn't one person, but two, so alike, from the quarter profile he could see, that he wondered for an instant if one was a reflection of some kind. But that couldn't be right, because they took turns talking, which explained the minute changes in the voice every few words. Even without being doubled, their appearance was rather daunting. They were several inches taller than him, and against the stark black robes of students their coppery hair was nearly blinding, a color that he'd never imagined hair could be.

"Yeah, but that's not the *point*," Augustus interrupted them. "It's not about if you're my friends! 'Fessor Dumbledore *trusted* me with Harry's room and I can't let--" His anxious gray eyes caught sight of Harry where he'd paused by the corner, and he lifted one hand gratefully. "Harry! Tell these two to go away! They won't listen to me!"

Harry blinked in surprise, but obediently repeated, "Go away."

The boys turned towards him at Augustus's first word, and Harry felt his eyes widen as he took in the two faces. He tried to refocus his eyes, but there was no illusion to see through, just the two identical faces with big brown eyes, widely grinning mouths, and dozens of little reddish-brown spots. One person, but doubled. And as he stared, they drew closer. He dropped his eyes slightly, realizing he'd been staring, and fell perfectly still.

"Harry Potter! Brilliant! We've--" the one on the left began.

--been looking forward to meeting you" the other one finished.

Each of them seized one of his hands and pumped it vigorously, while Harry stood passively, waiting to see what this strange double person was going to do to him.

"And you don't--" one of them started.

"--*really* mean you want--"

"--us to go away. I'm Fred Weasley."

"And I'm George. You've been--"

"--here a bit. Perhaps you've heard of us?"

They released his hands, and he allowed them to fall back to his sides, wondering how he'd gone wrong when they exchanged a glance that seemed faintly disappointed. Harry's eyes darted back and forth between them as they spoke, taking in the identical faces and the slight variation of their voices. "No," he admitted.

They exchanged a look and scowled. "You've been here for how long?"

"Five weeks," he said, forcing his hands to relax at his sides when they tried to clench nervously.

"And the professors have been here all that time?"

"Yes."

"And none of them ever mentioned the Weasley twins?"

"No." He was relieved at the reference to what they were -- he'd heard of twins, they were mentioned in his science books, he'd just never actually seen one before, except for Padma and Parvati who had looked similar to each other but not the same way these did. But at least they weren't some sort of magical reflections of each other or something.

The twins shared another long look, and then Fred scowled. "We obviously didn't make as much impression as we thought we had."

"Obviously. We'll have to do better this year."

"Clearly."

"Not even Snape?" George asked, turning back to Harry, a hint of a whine in his voice.

"No, I'm sorry. He never mentioned you."

"Well, that won't do at all. Anyway. Can we come in?"

"No!" Augustus interrupted, frowning. "He *told* you to go away! You aren't supposed to be here!"

"Headmaster said he can invite people--"

"--when he wants to. And--"

"--of course he wants to invite us."

"Right, Harry?"

"Don't mind Auggie -- he's just jealous that we're talking to someone other than him."

The little boy in the painting looked ready to burst into tears. "I am *not*! But the headmaster *said* I'm s'pose'ta guard Harry's room!"

"And you did!" the one who'd introduced himself as George, who had the slightly lighter voice, stated reassuringly. "We didn't stand a chance at getting by you. You're doing your duty with honor and skill."

"Only now Harry's here saying it's okay, so you can just let us in," Fred added.

"Now you're laughing at me!" the painted child cried, lip quivering. "You're mean and I hate you and Harry doesn't want you here!"

The pair drew on expressions of offended innocence. "How can you say that?"

"When we were working on arranging demonstrations in--"

--front of you of some new things we've been working on--"

--and everything?" they asked, resuming the switching off.

"Auggie, really, have we *ever* mocked you?"

The boy's lower lip stuck out as he crossed his arms over his chest.
"Yes."

"Well, yeah, okay, we have. But only because--"

--we think of you--"

--like family!" they both finished at once. "C'mon, Auggie, you know we tease everyone we like!"

"Yeah, and everyone you don't like!" he snapped back. "And everyone you don't care 'bout one way or th'other. Doesn't matter, anyway-- Harry said to go away, so go away!"

"But he didn't mean it! He didn't even know who we were. So, now that we've introduced ourselves --"

-- we can come in--"

--can't we, Harry?" they asked, finishing both of them together and grinning down at the younger boy.

"Yes," he said, uncertainly.

The twins grinned. "See?"

"You're both mean and horrid!" the little boy shouted, pouting.

"Aww, don't be like that, Auggie," Fred said, grinning.

"Specially not when we brought you a gift?"

Immediately the pout gave way to excitement. "A gift? For me?" Then the bright smile faded. "You're being mean again! You can't give gifts to paintings, unless it's another painting!"

"That's what you think," Fred disagreed. "Just you watch." He pulled out a small bottle that reminded Harry of a miniature version of one of Aunt Petunia's plant sprayers, and George took out a candy box which he placed against the painting, holding it carefully by one corner and standing well out of the way.

Fred began spraying the side of the box furthest from George's hand with an electric blue mist, and then moved slowly towards the middle. When he got to about the middle, George released the box which continued to hang on its own. In fact, the side that had been sprayed the most now looked as though it had been painted in as part of the original portrait. He finished, and the entire box melted into the picture.

Augustus pounced on the box with a shout of glee, opening it up to admire the chocolates inside.

"Now don't you go eating any of those," George recommended as the boy took out one of the candies to look at it more closely.

The child sent him a look of utter annoyance. "Course not -- I'd never eat something you gave me. They're pranks, not sweets."

The twins exchanged a look and grinned. "That's our boy," Fred said, sniffing nostalgically.

"All grown up and playing pranks on the other paintings," George agreed. "And you notice we didn't even try to bribe you with the gift before Harry gave his permission to let us in. So can we *please* come in, Auggie?"

Most of his attention still on his box of faux-candy, Augustus opened his portrait.

Harry looked uncertainly to the twins, who both waved regally for him to proceed them, so he stepped through the doorway into his room with a quiet, "Thank you, Augustus," to the painting. Inside, he turned nervously to look at the older boys as they followed him in. The nervousness turned to outright anxiety when he saw George's frown.

"How come you call him Augustus?" George demanded. Fred rolled his eyes and started glancing around the room.

Dropping his gaze slightly, Harry deliberately relaxed his body in preparation for the first blow. "I'm sorry, George. It was the name I was given for him."

"Well cut it out," he snapped. "He hates it. Call him Auggie."

"I'm sorry for not doing so before. I will now," he promised.

The frown faded into an expression of mild confusion, but finally George shrugged and grinned again. "So anyway--"

"--this place is brilliant!" Fred picked up. "S'better'n the prefects chambers."

George nodded cheerful agreement. "So show us around!"

Since Harry had no idea how to go about doing so, what to point out or what to say about anything, it was fortunate that the two older boys didn't seem to take the instruction very seriously. Instead, they bounced about the room, exclaiming over his private bath, playing for several minutes with the practice Snitch, and covetously admiring the gift certificate for Zonko's.

Finally, George picked up the Witch's Wode with a call of, "Hey, what's this, Harry?"

Fred turned to look at him, then dove across the room, grabbing the scraps of the broom that had been hidden behind the plant. "Never mind that! Is this -- er -- was this a Fledgling?"

"Yes," Harry said softly, not letting his shoulders stiffen.

"What happened to it?" George asked.

"I stepped on it," he admitted, refusing to let his fear show in his voice.

"That sucks," George said, examining the scraps and then looking at Harry with something far closer to sympathy than disapproval.

"Yeah," Fred agreed. The twins exchanged a long glance rich with raised brows, slight tilts of the head, and nods. Finally, they both grinned.

"You mind if we get rid of this for you, Harry?" George asked.

"We won't tell anyone you broke it or anything," Fred added.

"You can take it," he agreed quickly, not sure why they would ask his permission, but granting it quickly.

The pair exchanged another grin, then George was about to start speaking when Auggie slipped through to the inside of the portrait door. "Sorry, Harry, but I thought you should know it's pretty close to lights out, and I'm s'posta call a teacher if anyone but you's here after lights out without the headmaster's permission."

The twins bounded to the door. "That's okay! Enjoy your pranks, Auggie! Seeya tomorrow, Harry!" Fred called out. George grinned and nodded agreement, then both of them slipped through the portrait hole Augustus opened, linked arms, and began singing loudly as they skipped down the hall.

Harry stared after them for a long moment, then shook his head. "Thank you, Auggie. And I'm sorry for calling you Augustus if you didn't like it. I wasn't aware of your preference."

The boy in the portrait shot him a bright smile. "That's okay, Harry! I should've said something, only -- well -- I didn't." He grinned. "Anyway, goodnight, Harry!"

"Goodnight, Auggie," he said softly. The portrait closed, Augustus disappearing back to his own side of it, and Harry released a long breath. Those were the children he was supposed to be like. He was supposed to convince everyone that he was one of them, that he thought like them, felt like them, acted like them. How could he even begin?

With a sigh, he climbed carefully into bed, murmured, "Nox," to turn off the lights, and quietly began his catechism.

The following morning, Harry tried to decide whether or not it was a relief that it was still the weekend. On the up side, it meant that he didn't have to spend any time in classes doing his best not to learn anything. On the down side, he was given very little instruction on what to do during the weekends, and found the lack of structure frightening. He ate breakfast at the head table as usual, but the food hitting his stomach felt almost as restless as it had before the Hat had taught him to stop using his magic. His stomach roiled with unease under the gaze of so many eyes, since it seemed that the vast majority of the students were staring at him off and on throughout the meal.

After eating, he slipped away, quietly leaving the hall and moving towards the room where he met the hat, stopping on the way at a supply closet. Reaching the room, he stripped off his robes, and folded them carefully, setting them on part of the desk he had already cleared off. He spent most of the day there, cleaning, as he'd had little time to do since arriving. He worked through lunch, polishing and scrubbing, and finally, at nearly dinner time, stood back to survey his handiwork. A small smile touched his lips at the sense of accomplishment he got looking around. The wood work was shining and spotless, polished to the point that it almost glowed. The stones of the fireplace were clean, the whole thing emptied of ancient char and washed of old ash. The furniture's upholstery was neatly patched where it had been torn, and perfectly cleaned. Under the dust, it had turned out to be a rather handsome warm, dark red that seemed to fit well with the dark wood of the shelves and desk. It was rather a lovely room, and was finally back to looking as it ought to.

He pulled back on his robe, and then picked up his supplies and returned them to their closet. As he turned to leave it, a soft *mreoow* stopped him, and he turned. "Good evening, Mrs. Norris."

The cat blinked her large eyes at him, then leapt at his chest. Carefully, he held her in one arm, moving the other to scratch behind her ears as he started walking back towards his room. The rumble of her approval was half felt, half heard, as he slipped through the corridors. As he grew closer to the more populated parts of the school, he started hearing the talking and laughing of children, which grew

louder and clearer as he approached. Mrs. Norris jumped out of grasp and stalked away, tail high, just before a little cluster of boys a few years older than turned from another passageway and caught sight of him.

They stopped talking, staring at him, and Harry lowered his gaze uncomfortably to the floor, slipping by since they didn't stop him, and hurrying to his room to clean up. As he turned off, he heard them starting to talk again behind him, the words unclear but the tone excited. Suppressing a shiver, he continued on his way, finally reaching his room and thanking Augustus as the painting allowed him in.

He took a fast cold bath, changed into clean clothes, and hurried down to dinner. The halls were thick with students, but though many of them looked at him curiously, none of them talked to him, for which he was grateful. Just before he reached the great hall, a voice thick with disapproval called out, "Mr. Potter."

He turned immediately, eyes lowered, hands at his side. "Yes, Professor Snape?"

"I need a word with you, Mr. Potter. My office, please, after dinner."

"Yes, sir," he acknowledged.

The tall man nodded sharply, turned, and swept away into the Great Hall without a further word. Harry glanced around at the students who were staring at him with varying levels of sympathy and horror, swallowed, and moved self-consciously into the hall and up to the head table to take his seat.

Harry ate slowly and carefully, trying not to meet anyone's gaze. He hardly tasted the food as he methodically worked his way through it, wishing that everyone would stop looking at him. His pumpkin juice was topped off, and he looked up to thank Professor Dumbledore. As he was turning his eyes back to his plate, they were caught by two pairs of glinting brown eyes. The twins were both looking at him, and as they caught his eyes, they both grinned, winked, and then turned back to their food. Harry blinked uncertainly.

"I see you've met the Weasley twins," the headmaster said, a laugh in his voice.

"Yes, sir. Last night."

"You could do worse for friends, though some here might disagree with me," he said with a laugh, eyes flickering towards Professor Snape for an instant. "They cause a lot of mischief, but they have good hearts."

"Yes, sir," he said softly, when it seemed clear that an answer was expected.

"Have you talked to any of the other children yet?"

"No, sir."

"Well, it will come. They're all a bit in awe of meeting someone who they've heard so much about, but they'll doubtless get over the silent staring soon and start being more sociable."

"Yes, sir."

A hint of a sigh from the old man made Harry flick him another glance, trying to see what he'd done wrong, but the headmaster simply smiled at him and took another bite of chicken. Relieved, Harry turned his attention back to his food.

When, at long last, Professor Snape swept from the room, Harry finished his pumpkin juice, touched his napkin to his lips, and politely excused himself to go to the potions master's office. Reaching the painting of an ill-natured gentleman in dress robes, he murmured, "Could you please tell Professor Snape that I am here?"

The man in the portrait sneered at him wordlessly, but vanished to the other side, and moments later the painting opened. Harry stepped into the office, and waited.

"Mr. Potter. You are aware that on Wednesdays and Fridays you will be studying potions with the Ravenclaw/Hufflepuff first years, correct?"

“Yes, sir.”

“Then let me make something perfectly clear. You are not one of them. You are in the class because the headmaster has said it must be so, but you are there not to learn potions, but to learn potions *techniques*. You will not touch ingredient, knife, mortar, pestle, cauldron, or any other part of a potions making kit unless I expressly instruct you to do so. You will sit quietly, you will watch, and you will learn. Next year, presuming you get sorted, you'll be taking the class with whatever house you get into, and then you'll actually work on making potions. For now, you will watch, and that is all. Is this perfectly clear, Mr. Potter?”

“Yes, sir,” he agreed, hiding the relief that he felt at being told he wasn't to learn this type of magic for a while yet.

“See that you keep it in mind. That is all.”

“Yes, sir,” he repeated, understanding the dismissal and heading back to his own rooms.

"Hm... Interesting..."

The mediwitch's voice made Harry look up nervously, but Madame Pomfrey smiled reassuringly as she put her wand away.

"Well, Mr. Potter, I'm not sure how it came about, but it seems that your little anemia problem has cleared right up. I shall have to tell Professor Snape that he needn't work on a potion for you after all," she added thoughtfully.

"Thank you, ma'am," he murmured, not sure what else to say.

"Yes, well, it's rather intriguing, actually. I'd expect it to clear up, but it seems so odd that it didn't do so earlier," she said, brows furrowing slightly. Then she shook her head sharply and smiled again. "But no matter! You don't have to worry about it any more, at any rate, because you appear to be well on your way to perfect health! How is the chasing after the Snitch going for you?"

Harry blinked, then offered, "It's going well, Madam Pomfrey."

"How often are you doing it? Are you breaking it up, or doing it all at once every day?"

"At first I was doing it in three sets, Madam Pomfrey," he admitted, remembering the sense that he couldn't take another step if he didn't, yet knowing that he should have been able to. "Now I'm doing it in two. I still can't do it all at once," he admitted, eyes on his feet, waiting for the blow that he knew, now, wouldn't come.

"That's not bad. Your muscle tone is already improving a good deal, and your heart and lungs are both sounding a bit stronger. Would you be willing to do three twenty-minute sets rather than fifteens for a time? Or two half-hour sets, if you're up to it. Once we've got you all set, you can ease back down, and eventually shouldn't need to do anything more than your general walking around if you don't want to. But I'd like to be sure that everything is well before then!"

"Yes, ma'am," he answered quickly, taking the suggestion as an order.

"Okay, then. I guess that's about it for now. Off with you!"

"Yes, ma'am," he repeated, then stood up, unable to prevent the instinctive glance at the cot to be sure he hadn't messed up the bedding too much. Hurriedly, he left the room, barely hearing the whoosh of flames and the nurse's strong voice calling out the Potions Master's name behind him.

Harry tried not to see the green light reflect on the wall in front of him and turned quickly to go back to his room. He thought longingly of the Snitch for a moment, knowing that the exhaustion chasing it brought would help him sleep more soundly. And given that tomorrow morning was the first day of classes, he would be grateful for the assistance. It took a couple moments for the realization to strike him that he had wanted to use the Snitch. Shivering, he refused to look at the little ball as he knelt on the cold stone beside the carpet and murmured his catechism.

When morning did come, Harry ate his breakfast at the head table, ignoring the students as much as he could. They seemed to have spent most of the previous day watching him as much as possible, although so far only Fred and George had actually gone to his room, as well. When he finished, pleased to find himself full after eating less than he had been recently, he begged permission of Professor Dumbledore to leave, and slipped out of the Great Hall, wanting to be out of the hallways before the students filled them entirely.

He moved quietly through the halls, avoiding the more obviously magical sections (especially the floating stairs) whenever he could, and passed only three small groups of students before he reached Professor Mungrove's classroom. The door was open, and the professor was not yet there, so he moved inside and took the seat he had used the previous week. He sat perfectly still, folding his hands and waiting nervously. He wasn't sure what to expect of the class or what would be expected of him. Professor Mungrove had made it fairly clear that she wasn't happy to have him, which he appreciated, but he couldn't figure out what, exactly, she wanted him to do.

Professor Snape, at least, had been comfortingly plain in his instructions. He was alone in that.

Harry glanced over at the shelf of books, wondering if he should continue reading the one he had begun the previous week, but decided that touching a book without being specifically instructed to would be inappropriate. So he sat still, allowing his mind to wander over the familiar paths of what he ought to be doing and how he ought to be acting. The sessions with the hat were upsetting him. He couldn't decide how to react to its instructions. On the one hand, it was really convincing and perhaps even correct about how to deceive the professors into believing that he was failing rather than defying them. But it was teaching him magic, that much was certainly clear and could never be acceptable. His jaw clenched with the thought, and he forced it to relax almost before he noticed the tension.

Approaching footsteps drew his attention, and he waited uncertainly for the entrance of whoever was coming. He kept himself relaxed despite the hint of expectation that he would be punished for sitting down without an explicit instruction. But Professor Mungrove had told him the first time that he was to do so, and when he had not repeated it the next automatically, she had been upset. So he had decided that he must be intended to always enter and immediately take a seat, strange though that seemed.

The door seemed to almost explode inward, and he resisted the instinctive cringe back, barely jumping at the sound. It slammed back against the wall with a loud bang, which didn't seem to phase the children who streamed in. They were talking and laughing as they rushed into the room, eleven of them all at once and all wearing the yellow and black badge of Hufflepuff. One of them, a tall blond boy, stopped suddenly as he caught sight of Harry and waved the others to silence. "So, you're Harry Potter?"

"Yes," Harry said uncertainly.

The boy strode forward, one hand extended. "Zacharias Smith. Good to meet you."

Harry stared at the hand for a split second before raising his own and allowing it to be grasped and wrung.

"So what house do you expect to go into next year?"

"Oh, Zach, leave him alone," a girl with red-blond hair and gray-green eyes said, edging him off slightly. "You're intimidating him."

Zacharias looked offended. "I'm doing nothing of the kind. I'm being polite. Friendly. Welcoming--"

"Intimidating," another girl, this one with brown hair and eyes, interjected. "Here he is surrounded by all members of one house, and you ask him what house he wants to be in?"

A couple more boys entered the room just in time to hear this, this time wearing Gryffindor badges, and one of them, a boy with wiry, brown hair, called out, "Fair question. Gryffindor all the way, eh, mate?" he asked cheerfully, crossing over to Harry and slapping him on the shoulder.

He relaxed slightly, obedient to all his old lessons, waiting for the next blow to come.

"Now why would he want--" Zacharias started, thrusting his jaw out slightly as he turned to glare at the taller boy.

"To be anything but Gryffindor?" the other newcomer asked, grinning. "Good question. C'mon, Cormac, pick a seat."

Harry sat still, eyes lowered, as he waited for the buffet to his shoulder to be repeated with violent force. It didn't happen. Nor did Zacharias, despite his furious glare at the other Gryffindor, make any move to punish either Harry or the other boy.

Before the blond boy could say anything further, several Gryffindor girls came in, followed almost immediately by a handful of boys. They looked curiously at the face-off, one of them loudly demanding to know what was going on.

Zacharias shrank slightly beneath the gaze of so many more eyes, and, shrugging angrily, threw himself into a seat on the far side of the room from Harry. The others, too, began settling into their chosen

chairs, most of the Hufflepuffs taking the far side of the room and most of the Gryffindors the near.

"Is it so difficult to find chairs and seat yourselves in them?" Professor Mungrove's irritated question silenced all of the talking and laughter in the room, and the last few students scurried for the nearest seats. "I expect to find you all seated with your quills and parchment out and ready to take notes by the time class is scheduled to begin," she stated, the question followed by a rush of activity as the students grabbed for their materials.

Harry hesitated for a moment, waiting to be punished for not having anticipated the instruction and having his parchment and quill out, but, when she continued to ignore him, quickly fished them out of his knapsack and lay them out on the desk before him.

"Defense Against the Dark Arts is the most important class taught at Hogwarts," she stated, glaring around, daring any of them to disagree. "For that reason, anything less than your best effort will not be accepted for any reason. You are expected to be in class on time and prepared. You will have any assignments ready to turn in the moment you enter this classroom. And you will pay attention and *focus*—" She turned a glare on a boy who was leaning over to pass a note to the one beside him. "You are?"

He smiled at her cheerfully, as though not even realizing that he'd been misbehaving. "Anthony Capers, ma'am. Sorry."

"Well, Mr. Capers, you have lost Gryffindor two points. That might well be the first of the year-- you would do well to stop being sorry and start acting like a student. *Incendio*," she added with a flick of her wand.

Anthony yelped and dropped the smoldering note as it disintegrated into ash. He shook his hand, and blew lightly on his fingertips.

Professor Mungrove snorted. "You're fine. And perhaps next time you will refrain from passing notes in my class. As I was saying. In this class, you will learn to protect yourself from the various dangers that you are likely to face in the Wizarding world. From the hexes and curses that might be cast your way by dark wizards to threats from

magical beasts such as werewolves and vampires. Without what you should learn here, you could face a situation later on that will leave you badly injured-- or gruesomely dead. You will, therefore, be present, on time, and attentive. Is that understood?"

A murmur of affirmation answered her as she glared from one face to the next. When her eyes turned to him, Harry kept his gaze slightly down, his quill and parchment ready, and waited silently for whatever was to come next.

Finally, apparently satisfied with the effect her words had had, she nodded sharply and began to lecture on the most common varieties of shields. Harry took notes, trying as best he could to not actually *learn* anything of what she said.

He was startled to find that Anthony Capers was not the only one to draw her wrath over the course of the class period. And while the brown-haired Gryffindor girl, Katie Bell, did it by not answering her question quickly enough, two Hufflepuff students actually started holding a whispered conversation, which she'd clearly said not to do! He kept his horrified gaze down as she reprimanded them, and he tried not to think about what Uncle Vernon would have to say if he started simply talking about something else in the middle of a lesson. He couldn't stop the tiny shiver of response.

When the class finally ended, his hand was cramped from writing with the awkward quill, his back stiff from the chair, and his nerves frazzled from watching the students exchange whispers and rolled eyes whenever Professor's Mungrove's attention was on somebody else. It had, however, quickly become apparent that her attention could be in more than one place at once when she reprimanded them even when she had apparently been thoroughly involved with something else. And yet, they didn't stop! He couldn't understand it.

Harry slipped out with all the others when class was over, but quickly turned away and headed off down the hall, away from the moving stairs. Professor Dumbledore hadn't said that he had to start eating lunch with the others now that they were here, so he made his way to the kitchens and let himself in, made nervous, as always, by the fawning of the house-elves.

"Harry is here! And hungry, yes? Of course Harry is," Tozzy exclaimed joyfully upon seeing him.

"Yes, Tozzy," he admitted, ashamed of his weakness.

"Much good lunch we have made for Harry-- we have!" the house elf said, gesturing towards a little table that was loaded with sliced, fresh fruit, steaming bread with butter melting under a thick layer of preserves, a tall stack of thinly sliced beef, and lightly steamed vegetables half-drowning in more butter.

Obedient to the gesture, Harry moved in and sat down at the table with a murmured, "Thank you, Tozzy."

The house elf closed his eyes, shaking his head in amazement, and then moved to pour a tall glass of icy-cold pumpkin juice and set it before Harry. "Would Harry like milk, too?"

"No, thank you, Tozzy," he said softly, waiting for the elf to turn away before he began to quickly eat the meal, trying not to let himself taste it as he swallowed it down.

After lunch, he had to head up to the headmaster's office for his history class, and then over for reading and writing with Professor McGonagall. Both, he was relieved to discover, were far easier to spend time with now that they had specific lessons that they wanted him to learn. Both teachers did ask how he was doing and said that they had been sorry not to see him in the Great Hall at lunch, but they accepted his brief answers with less reluctance than usual and moved on to their lesson plans. Professor Dumbledore explained that he would be, over the course of the year, providing a brief overview of the history of the magical world, with a single exception. He would skip everything related to the Goblin Rebellion, since Professor Binns would cover that in remarkable detail later on. His eyes sparkled as he said it, and he grinned at Harry, who thanked him for the information and waited nervously for him to continue.

Professor McGonagall, on the other hand, began with a grammar book, explaining that she would not begin teaching him to compose essays until she was sure that he could compose a sentence, and began quizzing him on rules and details of grammar. Harry answered

as best he could, but Aunt Petunia, who had taught him all of his lessons, had been more focused on the evils of magic than the rules of grammar, and he didn't know the answers to a good number of them. He admitted his failings apologetically, and was surprised when Professor McGonagall smiled, one of the warmest expressions he'd seen on her face to date.

"No need to apologize, Mr. Potter," she said. "Indeed, it shall be a luxury to have you to teach now, so that when you *do* begin handing in essays to me, they shall be slightly less atrocious than those of your classmates. So, then. Let us begin!"

And finally, he descended to the dungeons to find Professor Snape in his small, personal potions chamber for his math lesson. The man had looked up from his work with a goaded expression and snapped for Harry to sit at the desk that had been set up for him and begin the stack of quizzes, so that the professor would have some idea of just how deeply his ignorance was rooted. Harry immediately obeyed, beginning the first quiz, which was simple arithmetic, and moving on quickly from there. When he completed the last quiz, most of it blank, since for most of it he hadn't even known what the questions were asking, much less how to answer them, he found that there was still most of an hour remaining before the period ended. So he watched the potions professor for several minutes, learning the pattern that he was following, and then moved silently forward to assist him until the two hour class period was up.

The next morning, Harry entered the greenhouses nervously, and was met by Professor Sprout's soothing smile.

"Oh, Harry, dear, you're early! But I must call you Mr. Potter, of course, since we are now in actual classes," she corrected herself quickly. "How did you do yesterday? Are your classes starting out okay?"

"Yes, Professor Sprout," he said softly, edging forward and then pausing.

"Excellent. You had ... Defense with the other students, wasn't it?" she asked, pausing for a moment to recall his schedule.

"Yes, ma'am."

"With the Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs. Of course," she said, nodding. "How did Professor Mungrove begin?"

"With basic shields, ma'am."

"A good place to start," she said encouragingly. "And did the other students seem to enjoy it?"

Harry blinked uncertainly. He'd never been asked to gauge somebody else's enjoyment before-- it was his duty to be certain that anything that was wanted of him, he provided, but to guess what somebody else wanted...? "I'm sorry, ma'am. I don't know," he finally admitted.

"Did anything go wrong?"

He hesitated, not certain what he should say, but finally offered, "Some of the students weren't paying attention, and the professor got upset."

She chuckled. "Well, with first years, you can't expect to have their full attention all the time. You weren't one of the ones who caused her trouble, I expect!"

"No, ma'am!" he said quickly, shocked at the idea.

She smiled, but before she answered, the greenhouse door opened and a handful of children with Slytherin badges stalked in, led by a tall black boy who gazed down his nose as he glanced around, careful not to touch anything. "Ah, welcome," she said cheerfully. "The others should be along within the next few minutes, I should think, so come along in."

The others did, indeed, show up before too much longer, and soon the room was full of Ravensclaws and Slytherins. None of them spoke to Harry, but he felt their eyes on him a good deal, weighing him. He didn't know what they could be trying to decide about him, but it seemed like every move he made was measured by the other students. Harry ignored them as best he could and focused on the

work Professor Sprout gave them to do, carefully packing earth into small pots, with a single tiny seed inserted into each one. The others got to work more or less cheerfully. A couple in each house appeared to be violently averse to actually touching the dirt with their hands; eventually, though, they all settled down.

Some time after Harry had lost himself in his work, a pot across the greenhouse from him exploded violently, showering the nearest students with dirt. One shard cut the face of the girl who had been handling it, and she yelped, dropping the remains, and clamping both hands over the cut.

Professor Sprout sighed. "And that," she said, "is, as I warned you, exactly what happens when you place more than one seed in a pot--even if they're well away from each other. They need boundaries as well as space. Mr. Potter, you know the way to the infirmary, do you not?"

"Yes, ma'am," he said.

"Please be so kind as to take Miss Aldridge there, would you? Madam Pomfrey will take care of her."

"Yes, ma'am," he repeated, turning uncertainly to the girl, who followed him quickly, hands pressed against her bleeding forehead, appearing to be near tears.

Once they got outside, she released the wound with one hand to scrub the back of her arm across her eyes, then put it back and looked over at him. "I *didn't* put two seeds in," she stated.

Harry looked at her uncertainly, not knowing what response could be expected of him.

"I didn't!" she said.

"Okay," he offered.

She sighed. "You don't believe me, but I really didn't. I wouldn't make that stupid a mistake. It was all that stupid Slytherin's fault. The tall one they're all mooning over. He threw an extra seed in just as I was

starting to tamp in the dirt-- I didn't see it until it was too late to stop, and as soon as it was in there-- *boom*."

He suppressed the instinct to jump at her last word, startled by its intensity, and glanced at her sideways, uncertainly, wondering if he should apologize for insincerity, if she thought he didn't believe her.

"And now they'll all think that I can't follow simple instructions. And I *can*. Or that I can't do magical stuff 'cause I'm muggle-born-- and I totally can. I just-- he threw it in my pot and I couldn't react fast enough."

Harry cast her a sidelong look at the reference to herself.

"What?"

"I'm sorry," he said softly, quickly looking away, horrified to have intruded.

"No, I'm sorry," she said, her voice suddenly softer. "I really am-- I'm just frustrated. I didn't mean to take it out on you. What were you wondering?"

Reluctantly, he voiced his question. "You're muggle-born?"

"Yeah," she said, shooting him an appraising look. "Does it matter? I know you're from one of those pureblood families, and some of them care."

He blinked, not certain how to answer her question. Because while of course it mattered since muggles were good, whereas wizards were bad, and so children of muggles had a better chance of one day being good themselves, he wasn't sure what he was allowed to say.

She looked at him for a moment and then laughed. The measuring look disappeared as she carefully removed one hand from her head, glanced at it, rubbed it on the side of her robe, and held it out to him. "Sorry, I didn't mean to put you on the spot like that. Just, some people have been really weird about the blood thing. I'm Leah Aldridge."

Reluctantly, he set his own hand in hers, and murmured, "It's good to meet you."

She shook it briefly, hardly more than a touch, and shrugged, returning it to her bleeding forehead. "I *am* sorry. I'm acting all obsessive and weird and I'm really usually not. Not really, anyway. It's just so weird being here, and I really, really want to do well. And so when things go wrong like this so soon, I get upset."

Harry noticed with relief that they were almost to the door. He had no idea what to say to the girl, and he was eager to have someone else for her to aim her questions at. Even if he *was* avoiding something unpleasant. He opened the door quickly, and Leah followed him inside, glancing around with a delighted smile.

Madam Pomfrey looked up at their entrance, and rose to her feet to hurry across the room, wand out before she'd fully reached them. "Oh what a mess! What happened?"

"Professor Sprout was having us plant Firefly Weed," the girl said. "My pot exploded."

"Two seeds in at once?" Madam Pomfrey clicked her tongue disapprovingly. "Never fails to happen to at least one student each year. Let's see how bad your cut is, then-- at least there's no burn this time! Thank you for bringing her, Harry. Tell Professor Sprout that her student will be just fine and isn't even likely to miss her afternoon classes!"

"Yes, ma'am," he said softly, and slipped back out of the room and down the hall.

He moved quickly back to the greenhouse, the trip back significantly shorter than the trip away had been. Going over, he hadn't been able to use the secret corridors without going against the order Remus had given him not to talk about them to anyone who didn't mention them first. Coming back was easier. He edged back into the room the others had been working in and found them just cleaning up their spaces and putting away their supplies.

Professor Sprout caught sight of him almost at once and cast him a smile. "You got back fast-- you didn't need to hurry, you know. Miss Aldridge is okay, then?"

He carefully relayed the nurse's message, and moved back to his stack of pots and the carefully separated seeds.

"Just clean up, your space-- it's lunch time," she said cheerfully.

He looked down at the unfinished work, and bit back the nearly-voiced objection. The realization of how close he had come to outright challenging an instruction was enough to banish his worry about the incomplete job as he cleaned up for it and moved quietly through the corridors towards the Great Hall.

Indeed, he was so wrapped up in thought that he didn't notice Fred and George Weasley coming up on either side of him until each set an arm around his shoulders. With cheerful greetings, they turned him from the head table, where he had been going, towards the Gryffindor table, and down between them onto the long bench.

"Hey, Harry, join us!" the slightly lighter tone he recognized as George's said cheerfully as they got him settled.

"Okay, George," he said diffidently, slipping into the seat he was pulled to. He saw the pair exchange a glance, but didn't know what to make of it, so he simply sat, eyes down, surrounded by Gryffindors.

"So you've been here five weeks, you said?" the other twin asked.

"Yes, Fred."

"Have you found anything...." he paused, and the other one finished, "Interesting?"

"I'm sorry, I don't understand," he said, leaving off a name, since he wasn't certain which one of them he should be addressing the answer to, the one who began the question or the one who finished. He looked up slightly as the table was abruptly set and reached forward to begin serving himself.

"You know. Anything--" Fred started, grabbing a roll off Harry's plate and setting it on his own.

"That might be useful," George continued, repeating the procedure with a couple slices of turkey breast.

"The cleaning supply closets?" he asked uncertainly, continuing to add food to his plate, as they continued to take it off.

The two stared at him with identical expressions of horror, and he bit off the automatic apology.

"No. You know. Like..."

"I dunno, maybe places--"

"Where you might be--"

"Able to get away from--"

"Someone like Filch?"

Each time one spoke, the other grabbed a food item off his plate and dropped it on their own. Wondering whether he should continue serving or if this was their subtle way of telling him that he was not to eat, Harry continued uncertainly adding food almost as quickly as it was taken away. "I don't understand," he admitted. "Why would I get away from Filch?"

Again, he was answered with identical looks of something between disgust and pity. "Harry."

He looked towards Fred, not quite raising his eyes to the older boy's face, waiting. "Yes, Fred?"

"Somebody has clearly been neglecting your education," he stated, as George scooped a large spoonful of potatoes and gravy off of Harry's plate and dropping it onto his own.

"You're missing the point here," George added, drawing Harry's attention while Fred took a slab of buttered bread from Harry's plate and took a bite out of it.

"You are," Fred agreed, through the mouthful of bread. "Filch's job is to make students miserable."

"If he finds you, he will make you miserable," George agreed, taking a bite out of a chicken leg that had rested on Harry's plate a moment before.

"As a student, it is your right--"

"And your responsibility to take every opportunity--"

"To avoid, confuse--"

"Frustrate, discomfit--"

"Confound, distract--"

"Embarrass, bedevil--"

"And otherwise make Filch's life as miserable as humanly possible," Fred finished, gesturing dramatically with the nearly-bare chicken leg.

"And so we return to the question," George said, and for the first time Harry's plate was not lightened as he turned from one brother to the other.

"Of have you found anything--"

"Interesting!" they both finished together, as Harry finally set down his plate with a small amount of food on it.

Harry's eyes flicked nervously between them, and he finally admitted, "I'm sorry-- I still am not-- I don't know what you mean by interesting."

They both rolled their eyes at the exact same time, and he found himself actually watching the movement in fascination before realizing what he was doing and quickly dropping his gaze.

"You know! Interesting!" George said. He glanced warily around and dropped his voice slightly. "Say, a secret passage, for example? Old castle like this... you must have looked, didn't you?"

Harry blinked uncertainly. "Yes," he said uncertainly. "Professor Dumbledore told me to explore the castle."

They stared at him. "You mean he let you--" Fred started.

He broke off, and for once his brother didn't take over. Instead, they both stared at Harry in total shock. Finally, George shook his head. "It's not fair, Fred, that's it."

"I can't help but agree with you, George."

"All alone, with the teachers hardly paying attention, actually *told* to explore?"

"Totally and completely without any hint of fairness."

"So, did you--"

"Here, now, what are you two doing?"

All three of them looked up at the officious voice, and the twins glared at the interloper. He was taller and slimmer than they were, but had the same bright red hair and freckles. His robes were mended but carefully pressed, and he glared back at them through a pair of horn-rimmed glasses.

"Ah, let be, Percy," Fred said.

"We're just keeping Harry, here--"

"Company. He doesn't--"

"Have any friends here--"

"Yet, you know."

"*You* are just being friendly?" the taller one, Percy, said doubtfully. "Trying to trick him into something, more like."

"Now, what would we trick him into?" Fred demanded.

"Trying one of your ghastly concoctions, perhaps. Honestly, I can't imagine, Fred, my mind could never be as convoluted as yours."

The twins exchanged a proud glance. "Thank you Percy, I think that's the nicest thing you've ever said to us," George stated.

"But I'm not Fred," Fred added. "I'm George."

Harry blinked uncertainly at the statement, not sure what it could mean.

Percy just waved one hand. "Does it matter? You might as well be the same person."

"No we mightn't!" George said, annoyed.

"Wouldn't be half so convenient," Fred agreed.

"Not being able to be in two places--"

"At the same time, would be--"

"Terribly troublesome."

"Well it would be a good deal better for the rest of us! Harry, although you are not officially a student here yet, it is absolutely essential that you begin as you intend to go on. And that means that if you fall in with these two ruffians, you will constantly--"

"Here, now, Percy!" a loud, cheerful voice interrupted. Harry looked up and had to resist the urge to shrink back as he saw yet another redhead, this one covered in so many freckles it was hard to see any paler skin. This one was the oldest yet, and grinned at him. "Leave the kid alone, huh? You're not a prefect yet. Besides, he's trying to eat his lunch."

"But--" Percy began.

"Thought you were having a potions test this afternoon?" the older boy added. "You completely ready? I thought you usually studied a bit extra on lunches."

Percy's eyes widened, he murmured a quick, "Tempus," and then bit back something else. He glanced at Harry again, looking divided, and then said, "Don't you let them lead you astray." Then he turned and hurried away.

The twins burst into gales of laughter. "Lead you astray?" George asked through his whoops.

"Nobody *talks* like that," Fred gasped back.

The older one rolled his eyes and offered Harry a wink. "Fred, George, I wanted to let you know that tryouts are this weekend--you've got potential as Beaters, but don't think I'll give you the positions just because you're my brothers. Be there, be on time, and earn it."

Instantly sobered, the pair nodded. "Of course, Charlie!"

"Wouldn't miss it."

"And thanks for getting rid of Perfect Percy," Fred added, wrinkling his nose.

"He's not all bad," Charlie said, grinning at their disbelieving stares. "And besides, if you make him angry enough, he'll tell mum, and it'd be just like her to say you couldn't try out for Quidditch or something."

The two exchanged horrified looks. "She can't do that!"

"And if she did, she couldn't hold us to it!"

Charlie snorted. "Right. She'd make my life miserable if I let you on the team when she said you weren't to try out. And since I bloody well think the team needs you, what with Cam and Eric gone, I'd thank you to leave Percy alone 'till after tryouts!"

They nodded reluctant agreement, and the older boy nodded once and moved down the table to talk to a muscular blonde girl who nodded quickly every few seconds as he spoke. The twins turned back towards Harry, who had been quietly eating, watching the interactions. Before they could ask him anything else, however, a black boy with the strangest hair Harry had ever seen dashed into the room and whispered something to each of them. Wide grins crossed the twins faces, and all three of them glanced around, and then nonchalantly got up and left. All of which Harry watched in confused curiosity, though he reminded himself that he had no right to curiosity. He should simply understand those things relevant to him and keep his thoughts out of everything else.

As the lunch period ended, students hurried away singly and in pairs and groups, the twins among them, Harry apparently forgotten. When he had completed his own lunch, Harry got up and moved quietly towards the third floor supply closet, which was the one furthest from the busiest areas of the school. He had a free hour, and had been using his free time to slowly begin to clean the back rooms. He just had to be careful not to leave himself filthy and bedraggled, since he just had the hour and Professor McGonagall would be expecting him after that.

His afternoon classes passed relatively smoothly. None of them were shared with any of the other students, and he found the professors far easier to spend time with now that they had specific material that they were trying to get across to him, rather than simply time to fill and no other means to fill it than to talk to him.

The following morning, Harry edged his way cautiously into the potions classroom, trying not to meet the eyes of the curious students who moved in around him. He settled himself into a desk in the back corner, reluctantly setting down the parchment and quill that he'd been given to take notes with. The quill seemed large and awkward to his hands, the writing it made scratchy and thin. And without lines, it was hard to write regularly on the parchment. He'd far rather use his notebook paper and pens, but had been told that it wasn't appropriate here.

Keeping his eyes down, he waited in silence. The other students, Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff first years, chose their seats and began settling down. There was still a good deal of chatter and movement when the door slammed open again and Professor Snape swept into the room, silencing all the whispers with a single furious glare. Harry locked his attention on the professor, but didn't let his eyes drift up above the top button on the man's black robe.

He began with roll call, going through the full list of students before finally turning to Harry and saying softly, "And, of course, we have *you*. I shall remind you only once: If you *touch* a single potions ingredient without my express instruction, you *might* live to regret it. Am I understood?"

"Yes, Professor Snape," he said, face forward, eyes down, waiting. He could feel the other students' eyes on him and heard at least one muffled snicker, but when he didn't have anything he was supposed to do, remaining still and silent was always the best course of action.

"We shall see," the Potions Master finally stated. "As for the rest of you," he stated, returning his focus to the real students. "You are here to learn the subtle science and exact art of potions making." He spoke far more quietly than Professor Mungrove had, and everyone fell still and silent, trying to catch every word. "You will find few opportunities for foolish wand-waving here, so many of you will hardly believe this is magic. I don't expect any of you to actually understand the beauty of the softly simmering cauldron with its shimmering fumes, the delicate power of liquids that creep through human veins, bewitching the mind, ensnaring the senses.... I can teach you how to bottle fame, brew glory, even stopper death -- if you aren't as big a bunch of bungling blockheads as I usually have to teach."

The man glared around for a moment, making eye-contact with each of the real students, and finally nodded sharply and began lecturing on the properties of common potions ingredients, with special attention paid to ways in which brewing them could be dangerous. Harry took careful notes, not looking at his fellow-students or the professor, except when the man was demonstrating something visual. It seemed as though the students frequently upset the professor. Instead of being properly apologetic and trying to atone for their

mistakes, though, many of them appeared to grow angry and caused still more problems. He tried not to watch them, focusing his attention firmly on the professor and the notes he was taking.

At long last, Professor Snape looked angrily around one last time, and then snapped, "Dismissed."

The children bolted for the door, several of them with their faces red or crumbling as though they were fighting back tears. Harry let them go first, and then followed them silently, slipping out of the room and then turning away from them to go the opposite way down the hall.

"Hey! Where're you going?" Leah, the girl he'd taken to the infirmary the previous day, demanded, turning suddenly towards him.

"The Great Hall," he said softly, wondering what he'd done wrong. "Professor Dumbledore said I should eat lunch there now."

She stared at him a long moment. "I thought the Great Hall was back this way?" she asked, pointing in the direction the other students were going.

"There are several ways to get there," he said.

She looked ready to say something else, but another girl, this one with long, straight, black hair and slightly-angled eyes, grabbed her hand and tugged. "Come *on*, Leah, we're gonna be late, and I really don't wanna miss lunch!"

Leah gave him one last measuring look and then turned and followed her friend at a half-jog through the hallways towards the great moving stairs that Harry tried to avoid.

Harry moved quietly down the passageway towards the tapestry of the night sky that hid a small staircase going up to the third floor. Just before he reached it, Mrs. Norris slipped out of the shadows and leapt up into his arms. He held her obediently, scratching her lightly behind the ears as he slipped in behind the tapestry and hurried up the steps of the narrow staircase. Her rumbling purr soothed some of the tension from his shoulders, where it had built up over the course of Professor Snape's class. Every time the man had shot a look his way,

Harry had suppressed the instinct to tense up, at least enough that it only slowly coiled in his shoulders and didn't show in posture or carriage. Each time, he waited for an order or reprimand or punishment of some sort, but nothing further had ever come of it; Professor Snape had simply glared at him, expression unreadable beyond the all-too-obvious irritation, and moved on, quickly enough that the pauses on him were hardly noticeable.

None of the questions Professor Snape had snapped out during the class had been aimed at him, and the professor seemed content to have Harry simply remain silently in his corner, not making any sound or motion beyond scratching his notes out on parchment.

Keeping Remus's words in mind, Harry looked cautiously out through a peekhole in the wall before slipping out into the hallway on the third floor. He wasn't as out of breath as the climb would have made him even a couple of weeks ago. Instead, he felt only a slight burn in his calves and quickening of his breath. Mrs. Norris squirmed out of his arms as he made his way into the public hall, and he waited patiently as she looked at him for a long moment before turning and sauntering away. Once she was gone, he walked quietly through the hallways, occasionally seeing children, alone or in clusters that seemed to be larger for the younger ones. A lot of them seemed to be staring at him, and he carefully kept his gaze down, not meeting anyone's eyes.

Harry tried to shut down his mind as he raced after the practice Snitch, unable to decide whether he should be doing this as well as he could or not. It seemed to be a purely mundane thing, with no magic at all to what he was doing except for the ball he was chasing. And so he didn't have to be bad at it, did he? His hand flashed out, and he felt the wings tremble against his palm for the instant he held it before releasing it. It vanished, and he paused, waiting, until a flutter of wings drew his attention back the way he had come. He lunged after it, skidding slightly as he rounded a corner.

He couldn't see it, but knew by now that if he stayed still, it would show itself again. He remained perfectly motionless, eyes lightly closed, patiently waiting as he listened for the soft whir that revealed its presence. At the sound, he opened his eyes and spun on his heel,

and a flash of gold had him racing down the corridor again. It didn't vanish this time, when it turned the corner, and he hurried after. Several minutes later, it paused, hovering at just a foot or two over his head, in the next intersection of corridors. Eyes narrowed with concentration, he leapt for it, hand closing on it just as a much larger hand closed around his.

He stared at it in horrified fascination, a large, muscular hand covered in freckles. Terrified, he turned his gaze up to find the older boy who the twins had called Charlie grinning down at him.

"Nice catch!" he exclaimed, releasing Harry's hand.

"Thank you," Harry whispered uncertainly, readying himself for a blow. "I-- I'm sorry."

"Sorry?" the older boy asked, brows raised. "Whatever for?" Before Harry continued, he added, "Wanna release it and try again? See who can grab it first? I've got the advantage, of course, on the ground-- longer legs and all. But let's see what you can do for yourself."

Obedient to the implicit order, Harry opened his hand. The Snitch flitted its wings a few times, hovering, then whizzed away, fast enough that they weren't even sure what direction it lay in. Harry fell perfectly still, waiting for it to reveal itself, and saw Charlie take a similar listening stance, eyes sweeping about, searching the corners and hallways. After a moment, Harry closed his eyes and listened.

He was moving the instant he heard the soft *whir* of wings, eyes opening only after he'd taken the first couple steps. Now that he was moving, he couldn't hear it, so he searched the area he'd heard it from, in front of him and low. A quickly-moving glint suddenly made him spin in place, leaping up, and his hand again closed around the feathery wings of the ball. The move threw him off balance, and he twisted, but knew it wouldn't be enough. Instants before he hit the hard floor, a pair of arms wrapped around him. He was pulled back into a hard, broad chest, and then set back on his feet by a grinning Charlie. Harry held himself perfectly still, eyes down, waiting for the reprimand or blow to follow.

"Very good! You must have ears like a bat!" His grin faded slightly as he added, "That jump was dangerous though-- if I hadn't caught you in time, you could have really hurt yourself, landing from that."

Harry kept his gaze fixed down, not answering since no question had been asked.

"You okay?"

"Yes, sir," he said softly, automatically.

A choked laugh answered him. "Charlie. Please. I'm definitely not a sir. Where'd you learn to hear the Snitch like that?"

Harry dared a glance up, trying to understand the question. "Here," he finally offered.

"How long have you been doing it?"

"Five weeks."

Charlie's eyes widened with something Harry didn't recognize. "Five weeks, huh. Any reason?" His voice sounded casual, but under that there was something else, something as unfamiliar with the look in his eyes.

"Yes, Charlie. Madam Pomfrey says it's for..." He hesitated a second, arranging the phrase in his head so he wouldn't stumble over it, "Cardiovascular fitness."

"So this is just exercise?"

"Yes, Charlie."

"Huh. How much do you do it?"

"An hour every weekday," he said, not allowing himself to wonder why he was being asked.

"Usually at about this time?"

"Yes, Charlie."

The redhead grinned at him. "How would you like a bit of competition?"

Harry paused, trying to understand the question. Finally, he said, "I'm sorry. I don't understand."

"I've been feeling in need of a bit of cardiovascular fitness, myself," he explained. "Think I might join you, if you don't object. Do you?"

"No," he said quickly. "Of course not."

"Good," the older boy said with another of his broad grins. "Then how about you release the Snitch?"

"Of course," he murmured. "Sorry." And then it was in the air again, and, moments later, the two boys were racing through the hallways after it. Charlie was faster, but Harry usually noticed it first, and they traded off catches fairly evenly. They took a brief break between Harry's half-hour sessions, Charlie breathing easily and lounging back against the wall, eyes remaining steadily on the younger boy. Harry stayed still under the gaze, trying to recover his breath. Once it was coming a little more smoothly, Charlie began talking cheerfully and asking Harry questions, mostly about things like which house he expected to be in. He answered as best he could, mostly offering his uncertainty and Professor Dumbledore's statement that they wouldn't find out until next year. When Charlie pushed off from the wall after a few minutes, Harry rose. It hadn't been quite as long a break as he would have taken if left to himself, but it was no longer his decision to make. When Harry finally got to bed that night, he was asleep almost before his head hit the pillow.

Harry paused just inside the entrance to the Great Hall, eyes flickering up, not to catch a glimpse of the enchanted ceiling before banishing it from his mind, but to follow the spinning and diving of two boys on brooms and the large, dull, black ball being knocked back and forth between them, loud *cracks* growing faster and louder as the two sped up, most of the students laughing and cheering, while a few jumped and cowered as the ball came closer to them.

There were only three teachers in the room, none of them ones that Harry had lessons with, and all were shouting at the boys to land *immediately*. To Harry's shock, the boys, the Weasley twins, he realized, made no sign of even hearing the orders, much less obeying. He hesitated, uncertain as to what he should do. It couldn't have anything to do with him, but simply going to his seat and beginning to eat seemed somehow inappropriate.

Before he could make up his mind, he saw one of the twins dive, club extended, and clip the ball. But instead of sending it flying back towards his brother, he got it at such an angle that it spun about and headed straight for Harry, the dull metal glinting slightly as it approached. Harry saw the twins' faces pale and the two mouths open in matching expressions of -- something; he didn't know what -- before the ball blocked them out. He forced himself to relax, knowing it would hurt, knowing better than to avoid the blow. He wasn't sure what the punishment was for, and that made him feel worse. He was always supposed to know.

Instants before the ball landed, Harry was grabbed and shoved aside, a heavy weight rolling over him, hands a big hand tucking his head down between a muscular shoulder and the stone floor. Then there was a loud *thwack* from what felt like just above him, and a sudden babble of noise in what had been deathly silent.

The grip on Harry loosened and the person pinning him slowly rose. Harry rolled to his knees when he was released, keeping his eyes down, and the larger boy squatted in front of him, one hand on his shoulder. "Harry? Are you okay?"

Surprised, he glanced up, confused by the concerned expression in a tanned face under a head of brown hair. He didn't recognize the boy, so he offered simply, "Yes. I'm sorry."

"*You* are? Someone else will be pretty damn soon," the boy growled, rising.

"Harry? Are you okay?"

This voice was more familiar, but before Harry could answer Fred's concerned question, the other boy shouted, "What were you thinking, Weasley! Someone could have been killed!"

"Harry's okay," Fred answered defensively. "Aren't you, Harry?" he asked, worry leaking back into his voice.

"Yes, Fred."

"See?"

"I see that thanks to good luck and good reflexes -- yours as well as mine, I'll give you that much -- nobody's been seriously injured-- but don't you ever *think*? Merlin, if I hadn't been there, that Bludger would've got him head on!"

"And if I hadn't gotten there it would've gotten *you*!"

"And how does that make it better?" the other boy roared.

"Well -- Merlin, Harry, why didn't you *move*?" George demanded angrily, coming up beside his brother.

Harry glanced up uncertainly, again knowing that he'd done something wrong, but not at all sure what it was. "I'm sorry--" he started.

"Well, you shouldn't be! This is *his* fault now? Merlin, what is *wrong* with the pair of you?"

"Thank you, Mr. Diggory, I believe that is a question better worked out with me than with you," a new voice, tight with repressed emotion

interrupted. "Thirty points to Hufflepuff for a timely rescue. Fifty from Gryffindor for not only flouting school rules, but for doing it in such a way as to risk the lives of you peers. And I'm of a mind to remove you from the team as well," Professor McGonagall continued. "Remove yourselves from those brooms at *once*."

Harry, looking up through frightened eyes, saw the twins exchange a quick glance and then quickly dismount the brooms. As soon as each of the two were firmly on the ground, Professor McGonagall held out one demanding hand. Reluctantly, the brooms were placed into it and with a swish and a murmur she shrank them down and placed them in a pocket.

Harry risked a glance about and saw several other teachers ranged behind the deputy headmistress, apparently all having just entered the room together. "What I should like to know," Madam Hooch said, eyes locking on Harry with an expression that made him drop his eyes again, invisibly bracing for the blows to follow, "is just how they got by the Great Hall's wards----because there is presently only one broom that legitimately has charms to bypass them. Have you any comment, Mr. Potter?"

He began to offer an uncertain apology, but George interrupted, "It wasn't his fault!"

While Fred said, "He didn't know! We borrowed his broom, is all."

"He didn't even know----"

"----about the charms."

"And do you have it still?" she demanded, turning her sharp eyes to them.

Fred heaved a heavy sigh and George stuffed a hand into his pocket and drew forth the tiny broom, as whole as though it had never been broken, and held it out to Harry, who looked nervously at Madam Hooch.

"Oh, take it," she said, expression warming slightly. "I should have warned you not to loan it to any other students, I suppose. I know

how persuasive this pair can be---- just don't let anyone else have it without asking a teacher first ---- understood?"

"Yes, Madam Hooch," he said softly, carefully accepting back the broom, not allowing his dismay at seeing it whole and well to show on his face. Nor the involuntary jolt of joy he felt as it touched his palm."

She nodded, turning back to the twins, lips thinning.

Professor McGonagall took one step forward, turned so she was facing the door once more, and took each of them by the near ear, leading them by these handles towards the main door of the Great Hall. "As for you two rascallions, we must decide what punishment more than points is likely to make some scratch on your self-satisfaction. With me, please, Mist'ers Weasley."

And she marched them through the door, to waves of laughter from several parts of the room, quickly muffled as the other remaining teachers glared around. Then Professor Sprout touched Harry lightly on the shoulder, and he looked up nervously. "Are you okay?" she asked softly.

"Yes, Professor Sprout," he answered uncertainly, wondering why they kept asking him that and what the proper response was.

She stared at him a long moment, then nodded. "Come along, then. Lunch is still important."

"Yes, Professor Sprout," he repeated, and followed the professor up to the head table and sat down to begin eating as the normal sounds of the Great Hall at lunchtime gradually won out over the silence that followed the twins' removal.

It was nearly a week before he returned to his room one evening to find the twins standing outside, looking around nervously. They brightened upon seeing him. "Harry!"

"We've been wanting----"

"----to talk to you. And apologize----"

“---for the Bludger thing. We didn’t---“

“---mean to hurt you.”

“Or even anyone else, really,” Fred finished with an afterthought.

“You didn’t get in trouble for lending us your broom, did you?”

“No,” Harry said uncertainly.

“Well, good, ‘cause it wouldn’t’ve been fair if you did. But look---“

“---as payback, we thought---“

“---we’d tell you. If the broom ever breaks again---“

“---there’s some pretty nice charms on it. And one---“

“---fixes it. We didn’t do it or anything---“

“---just found and activated it. So if it ever breaks again---“

“---let us know and---“

“---we’ll fix it! Okay?”

Harry felt something building in his stomach, cold and painful, but said, “Yes, George.”

“Good! Okay, can’t stay, but we’ll be back later!” Fred said, glancing over his shoulder down the hall and then dashing off in the opposite direction, George right beside him.

A moment later, as Augustus was opening to let Harry in, Percy stalked around the corner, nodded stiffly at Harry, and kept going. Harry wondered why the Gryffindor prefect’s hair was purple, but knew he couldn’t expect to understand what better people did, so just wished him a quiet good evening and then entered his room, wishing once again that he could return home where he at least had some idea what was going on.

Everything was so painfully confusing here. He slipped past the painting with a quiet, polite acknowledgement of its greeting, and stood perfectly still until it closed behind him. His eyes moved immediately to the tiny broom, whole and perfect once more, sitting on the bookshelf, then he forced them away again. He picked up his text on mathematics, knelt on the stone floor beside the carpet, and began to carefully do his homework. Math made a certain amount of sense to him. It had rules, and it followed them, unlike in writing, where it seemed that every rule had dozens of exceptions. You never knew where you stood with writing. Everything in it was so subjective. With math, if you followed each step logically and carefully, you reached the same result every time. History confused him because different people reported the same events differently, when obviously only one thing had happened. He didn't know who to believe, and there was nobody here he trusted to tell him which was right.

He nearly completed the problems that had been set to him before rising and going downstairs to dinner. There weren't a lot of them, and they weren't hard, exactly, but each one had a lot of steps to be completed, so it took a long time. He moved quietly to his seat and sat still between the headmaster and the deputy headmistress, eyes down. Even now, weeks after school had started, people stared at him. Not everyone, anymore, and not all the time, but there were usually at least a couple pairs of eyes on him. It made him nervous.

The twins seemed excited about something, heads leaned together and talking rapidly in quiet voices, excluding everyone else from their circle. Lee, the black boy with the odd hair that seemed to be with them most, didn't seem to mind. He talked to another boy, occasionally glancing towards Fred and George and shaking his head. They took no notice of him or anyone else. Harry glanced at Charlie, and he found the older boy's eyes on him, studying him. Charlie flashed him a grin when their eyes met, then returned to his own meal. A lot of them looked at him that way. As if they were trying to see something under his skin, or to understand something they couldn't quite figure out. He didn't know what it meant, but he was used to not understanding people.

When the food appeared, he focused on eating just enough that his stomach stopped giving any signs of hunger and he could trust the

magic not to rush in to fill the gap without his constant attention. It was hard keeping it back, but he managed it almost all the time, now, though he was still worried about getting hungry when he didn't deserve to eat. It was defiance. And while maybe defiance wasn't as bad as using magic, it was still *bad*. Uncle Vernon was going to be furious. He suppressed a shiver at the thought, and took a bite of potato.

For once, the twins were the first to leave the Great Hall, their plates empty and their heads still bowed together, still talking rapidly and quietly. "Dear Lord," he heard Professor McGonagall murmur beside him. "This can bode no good-- those two are obviously planning something."

Professor Dumbledore chuckled. "They are remarkably resourceful boys when it comes to amusing themselves. I look forward to seeing what they come up with next."

"You would." Professor McGonagall's voice was dry and unamused, though Professor Flitwick tittered from a few seats down.

"Indeed I do. I have fond memories of their decorations last Christmas. Harry, my boy, you've finished your applesauce-- wouldn't you like some more?"

"Yes, sir," he admitted, ashamed of his weakness. He hadn't known what it was the first time he'd seen it. It didn't look much like what Aunt Petunia bought. That was soft and grainy and smooth and pale yellow. This was a darker color, almost brown, and lumpy with chunks of stewed apple. He had to watch himself carefully when it was served-- he often came close to continuing to eat it even after he wasn't hungry any more. He didn't even know why-- just that sometimes it was agonizingly difficult not to take just one bite more.

This time, he stopped when the additional spoonful the headmaster had served him was half gone, deciding that he'd won a few hours' peace from his magic. "May I be excused, sir?"

The head master smiled at him, blue eyes twinkling with something else behind them, something not twinkling at all. "Are you quite sure, my boy?"

"Yes, sir."

"You haven't had a chance to ride your broom since school started again," he said slowly. "Perhaps we can arrange something soon. Would you enjoy that?"

"Yes, sir," he admitted, ashamed of the eagerness that crept into his tone, though the headmaster lost that look behind the sparkle at his answer, so maybe the eagerness had been right. Or would have been if it wasn't real.

"Capital," Professor Dumbledore said cheerfully. "I feel quite sure we can arrange something. And yes, Harry, of course you may be excused, if you like."

"Thank you, sir," he said, then rose and left the Great Hall, feeling eyes on him as he walked through the huge room and then out.

He was almost immediately grabbed by both arms and hustled behind a statue. "We weren't going--"

"To tell anyone--"

"But since we owe you--"

"--For the Bludger thing--"

"We figured we'd tell *you*."

Harry looked anxiously up at the twins, not at all sure what the correct next response was. Fortunately, they didn't seem to need a response and were perfectly willing to continue on their own.

"You know how we were asking--" Fred started.

"--about secret passages?" George finished.

"Yes, George," he agreed softly, unsure as always which of them it was proper to respond to.

"Well, now we know them all."

"Look!"

Fred brandished a large, creased piece of parchment before him, and then the two said together, "I solemnly swear that I'm up to no good."

Harry swallowed as the paper blurred and then grew dark, and seemed to crawl with motion as lines formed over it, making a map of the school.

"It has them--"

"All! Look!"

So he looked. The map was more complete than the one the headmaster had given him, most of the rooms drawn more accurately to scale and the passages connecting them revealed, some with a few words written near one end or the other. Some of them were still not on there, he noticed.

"Isn't it--"

"--Brilliant?" they demanded together.

Harry looked up at them uncertainly. "Yes," he offered, since it seemed to be what he was supposed to answer.

The pair glanced at each other and sighed. "He's so hard to impress," George said sadly.

"One of these days we'll manage," Fred said reassuringly.

"Yeah." George's face brightened. "But for now, we have things to explore. C'mon, Harry. Let's go."

"Yes, George," he said obediently, moving to follow the pair as they led him down a hallway.

"How come you do that?" Fred demanded abruptly.

His footsteps almost faltered, but he managed to keep them steady. "I'm sorry, I don't understand, Fred," he admitted. "Do what?"

"You talk funny," George explained. "Like Percy on a bad day."

"If he had any good days."

"Formal."

"And names all the time."

"And too polite."

"And acknowledging every little thing with 'Yes, Fred'."

"Or 'Yes, George'."

"It's weird."

He looked back and forth between them as they spoke, trying to understand. "I'm sorry--"

"And apologizing all the time," Fred added, glancing up and down the hall and then turning quickly down a narrow side passage, Harry behind him and George bringing up the rear.

He thought about what they were saying, trying to think of how the children talked, how even the adults talked, and realized that he should have seen this for himself ages ago. Only-- to *not* use names was discourteous. Informality was a sign that he thought himself as good as everyone else-- and here he was supposed to pretend that he did, he realized in chagrin.

They reached the hidden door where a wardrobe swung out away from the wall if you hit a hidden catch behind the hinge, and Fred glanced down at his map and then proclaimed, "Starlight is too bright." Even though he hadn't touched the catch, the door swung open, and Harry felt a shiver move through him at the wardrobe swinging around without a single hand on it.

Fred and George stared into the darkness beyond for a moment, then let out a pair of quiet whoops and rushed in, George murmuring a soft, "Lumos," under his breath and causing the little staircase to become visible in the light shining from his wand.

It looked pretty much like Harry had always imagined it would. He'd never had a light, of course, but the large, rough stone steps were the unpolished gray he'd imagined, and the walls the smoother, and yet still not *smooth*, stone that they'd seemed to be under his hands. Most of the passages had rougher floors than the rest of the castle. People didn't seem to use them very often for some reason, and he thought maybe that was why. Maybe the floors that got used a lot were smoothed out by that use, as thousands and thousands of feet ground out the roughness.

"It works!" Fred exclaimed, looking delightedly down at the map.

"Some of the passwords might have changed," George pointed out.

"But they might not."

"And the map might change to match."

The pair grinned at each other, then dashed up the stairs. Harry followed them, wondering why they were so eager to get to the corridor near the Hufflepuff dormitory, but not about to ask. They exploded out of the passageway, and hurried towards a painting Harry had thought was just a picture of an empty room for nearly two weeks before he'd finally seen a cat in it one time and realized it had been meant to be there. He hadn't seen the cat since in that painting, although he occasionally caught sight of it in other ones. The painting slid aside to reveal a long, narrow corridor that ran nearly the length of the school with four doors off it, each of which the twins opened and explored beyond. Each time they reached another one, they looked at the map, said a password, and it opened up without requiring a touch or manipulation such as Harry had discovered. He followed along quietly, sure assuming that they would eventually tell him why they wanted him with them, and didn't comment as they got more excited with each passageway, e. Even the ones that didn't go anywhere and just ended in a pile of rubble seemed to please them.

He bit his lip and followed as they dragged him out of the castle and onto the grounds. It was dark, too dark to see anything beyond the flickering light of George's wand, and he was grateful for that. If he tried, he could pretend that he was inside, that there wasn't a hungry, gaping void above him, waiting for -- who knew what such a thing

was awaiting. He tried to pretend it didn't exist, a hand on his wrist a quiet warning against admitting to his terror. It only held him now, tugging him along, but it could easily enough turn to strike him or to hold him down and make him stare into the night until his eyes adjusted and he saw the nothingness above him. He followed, trying desperately to be good.

They paused just outside the cover of a huge tree that seemed to sway in a rhythm that didn't quite match the wind.

"Ready?"

"Here we go."

"Wait here, Harry!"

The pair moved in tandem, letting go of Harry and springing forward into long tendril-like branches that moved suddenly, sweeping around to hit them. He watched as Fred pulled out his Beater's bat from somewhere and fended the fronds off George, who ignored them with the utmost confidence, moving quickly forward to punch a knot in the tree. It fell still, the fronds hanging limply, and the twins grinned, their teeth flashing in the light of George's wand, and calmly came back to grab Harry again and pull him into a hole in the roots of the trees and into a dark, earthy tunnel. He was too relieved to be out from under the sky, even though he hadn't been able to see it, to think too much about where they were going.

Fred started whistling, and then George joined in with an entirely different tune, which made Harry's head hurt with trying to follow both at once. Every now and then, they traded songs without a hint of warning or fumble. They were excited and moving quickly enough that he had to jog a little to keep up, and if it weren't for the hands on his wrists he would have thought they'd forgotten he was there. When the tunnel finally ended, he braced himself to go back out under the sky, but instead when they forced up the creaking trap door he found that it led into a house. They climbed up, Harry trailing behind, and the twins each raised a hand, which they slapped their hands together over their heads.

"It's the Shrieking Shack!"

"Never doubted it."

"Course not."

The room they were in was filthy. One of the windows was broken and leaves and dirt had blown in to add to what seemed like it had probably been a pretty filthy room to start with. Beneath the dust, the walls were smoke-stained and cracked in places. The fireplace logs set in it ready for a fire, but had never been lit. The twins rectified this, tossing most of the leaves on the floor into the fireplace and setting them alight with a spell, another quickly cleaning off the worst of the hearth, so that the fire wouldn't jump to the thick dust covering the room. Then they collapsed onto a decrepit couch, one short leg of it following their example to collapse beneath the added weight, leaving the couch to list towards that corner. It didn't seem to worry the twins, who laughed at being tumbled together. George braced himself and sat at the high end, then flipped over so his legs hooked over the arm and his body stretched down the seat towards his brother.

"There," he said cheerfully. "No more sliding."

"Seat yourself, Harry," Fred said, equally cheerfully, sitting cross-legged at the low end of the couch.

Harry looked doubtfully at the couch sagging beneath the twins, George's head coming almost to Fred's knee, and hesitantly knelt before it, facing them, back to the fire. He was glad to face away from it. He wasn't sure if it was the magic or just all the burning dust, but it sparked and fizzed as it burned, and he didn't want to see it.

"You know what your problem is, Harry?"

"What, Fred?"

"Other than that you use names too much--"

"--And that you always get them right--"

"--It's that you never *ask* anything."

He hesitated, uncertainly. "What should I ask?"

The twins groaned, George rolling onto an elbow to glare at him, and he dropped his gaze, waiting for the blows that on some level he knew weren't going to fall. They never did.

"It's no fun if we *tell* you what to ask."

"Although we could make it a lesson."

The pair gazed at each other, and then shrugged simultaneously. "A lesson, then."

"I always fancied teaching."

"Did not."

"True."

"In a situation such as this, it is only natural--"

"--and polite--"

"--to be curious. So questions such as: Where'd you get the map?"

"How does it work?"

"Did you make it?"

"Is there another?"

"How many passages does it have?"

"Where can you go to?"

"Where can you go from?"

"Where are we?"

"Where can we get from here?"

"Where can you hide and see what's happening outside?"

"Or hear?"

"Or smell?"

"Or taste?"

"Maybe not taste."

"Depends on the situation."

"But these are questions that are natural to have."

"Got it?"

Harry wasn't sure that he did, but nodded hesitantly, mindful of their earlier injunction not to acknowledge everything verbally.

"Okay, good. Your turn."

"Where did you get the map?" he asked obediently.

"Funny that you should ask!"

"You see, we happened to be in Filch's office--"

"--When he wasn't, of course."

"Oh, of course. It's no fun at all being there with him."

"And we came across a cabinet with some fascinating papers--"

"And when we say papers, we mean files--"

"Including a wholea good-sized drawer devoted to us!"

"(Appropriate questions here might include: What are the files?"

"Why so many on you?"

"And how did you get to be so brilliant?)"

"What were the files?" he asked obediently.

"Not now! We're telling a story!"

"Sheesh, . some Some people."

"No sense of appropriateness."

Harry suppressed a flinch and wondered if it would be okay for him to inch forward a bit. The fire behind him was becoming far too hot on his back. He stayed still.

"So at the bottom of one of the drawers--"

"Which had mostly gags and pranks in it--"

"--We found a piece of parchment."

"We tried a revealing charm, of course--"

"But it just insulted us. Which was an insult--"

"To our intelligence. Nobody would bother making--"

"Such an excellently charmed parchment--"

"'Cuz there was just something about it--"

"And just make it insult people. No point to it."

"Unless it was a disguise for something else."

"So we took it."

"Appropriate questions: When was that?"

"How long did it take you to figure it out?"

"Was it hard?"

"How did you work it out?"

"What happened next?"

Harry waited. So did the twins. Finally, Fred groaned, and George said gently, "That's your cue, Harry. Question time."

The gentle tone sent shivers down his spine, so he quickly asked the shortest question they'd suggested, hoping that they'd forget this failure and get caught up in their stories once again. "Was it hard?"

"Was it hard he asks!"

"Was it!"

"Try Flooing without powder!"

For a split second, he didn't comprehend. He'd gotten so used to the anger passing without consequence. Then it struck him like a fist to the stomach, and he barely managed to stop the resulting gasp. He deserved his punishment. And if he hesitated, he'd deserve worse. He rose to his feet, turned, and moved quickly towards the fireplace.

Just as he reached it, a weight hit him, wrapping around him and flinging him to the side, and he rolled to his knees, eyes down, forcing his breathing to remain even as Fred shouted and swore and there were little sparks as George helped his brother pound out the flames that had caught on the back of his robe when he threw Harry aside. Then both were in front of him, and George grabbed his shoulders and shook him. "What was that? What the hell was that?" he demanded, voice cracking slightly with fear and anger.

Harry kept himself still, waiting for the inevitable blows to follow. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "I don't understand."

George's hand cocked back, and Fred caught it, seeming a lot calmer than his brother although he was the one whose robes had caught fire. He carefully stepped between his brother and Harry, and said, "Harry. What were you doing?"

"Trying to Floo without powder," he recited the words as though they were the answer to one of the math questions Professor Snape gave him. A simple fact with no deeper meaning that had defined his punishment.

"That's-- it doesn't work like that, Harry."

He was confused at why Fred was using his name after telling him that normal people don't use names. Or was he trying to say that he wasn't normal either? But why that way? They hadn't asked any questions, so he kept his silence, waiting.

"Did you think it would work?" George asked, something strange in his voice, something Harry didn't recognize.

"No, George," he said, then withheld a flinch at having disobeyed the earlier instruction about names.

"Then what did you think would happen?" Fred asked, voice confused, hands gentle on Harry's shoulder.

"That I would burn," he said.

And suddenly George's hand reached past Fred to grab Harry's chin and twist it up so he was looking at the older boys, who were both staring at him in -- something. "What did you think would happen?" George demanded.

Uncertainly, he repeated, "That I would burn."

The two exchanged a look, messages passing between them magically, or perhaps it was just because they were twins, or maybe it was something else entirely. "Then why did you do it?" Fred finally asked, turning back to him.

"Because you told me to," he stated, confused as to how there could be any question.

"If we told you to jump off a bridge would you do it?" Fred asked, the tone making it sound as though he were quoting something, though Harry wasn't familiar with it.

"Yes," he said.

The half-smile Fred had developed vanished as they both stared at him, expressions he couldn't read flitting across their faces. Mostly at the exact same times, which made him want to look away, but the hand still gripped his chin, so he stayed still and waited.

"What if someone else told you?"

"I would obey," he said.

"Anyone?"

"Yes."

"Any order?"

"Yes."

Again they fell silent. Then George released his chin and he dropped his gaze to the floor again.

"This is bad," Fred said, his voice quiet and not sounding at all like it usually did.

"You think?" There was a high, sharp note in George's response.

Both of them turned back to Harry, eyes locked on his, and demanded in the same instant, their voices merging into one, "Why?"

Harry blinked. Then realized that every answer he had would tell them something Uncle Vernon had told him not to tell anyone. He shouldn't have said it in the first place, but what else could he have said? He stared at them, eyes wide, and searched for an answer. They stared back, eyes burning. "I can't talk about it," he finally offered, dropping his eyes, though his face was still held up.

They didn't answer for a long moment, then one of them said, "Does Dumbledore know?" The voice was so tight, so unlike how they usually sounded, that he wasn't sure which one it was from, but that wasn't what was important.

"Yes," he said, since everyone knew. Except for Fred and George, apparently, or maybe they were just really good at pretending. Which they were, he reminded himself, since they showed no sign of the disgust they must be feeling to from be so close to him, touching him, speaking to him.

The grip on his chin loosened slightly, and he held perfectly still, not sure what was to come next. "Okay. So he's working to fix it." That time, he knew it was George, who sounded far more like himself again.

Harry just waited, trying not to remind them that he was there, that they should punish him, that they were touching him.

"He didn't say anything."

"But he wouldn't."

"And for Merlin's sake, Harry, you shouldn't have either!"

"I'm sorry," he whispered, starting to drop his head further, then freezing as the fingers on his chin didn't give.

"Yeah. Well. Who knows what people will say if they know you'll do anything they say!"

"Don't you have *any* sense?"

"I'm sorry," he repeated.

"Ease off, George. Don't tell anyone else, huh, Harry?"

"Yes, Fred."

"And we'll see to it that nothing too bad happens. I didn't even know there was a hex like that."

"Except Imperius."

"And this is worse! In that, you don't *know*."

They both shivered, the hand on his chin trembling for an instant before dropping away from him. "Right. Nothing too bad can happen in classes."

"Even Snape wouldn't let anyone *really* hurt you."

"Probably."

"Yeah. And at the head table, you'll be safe."

"And in your room."

"So evenings, meals, and free periods."

"And between classes."

"But there's not so much we can do there."

"Well..." Fred's voice trailed off, rising slightly, and they both smiled slightly.

"True..."

"Okay. We'll handle it."

"But for now, we better get back."

"C'mon."

And they again started through the tunnel, though the twins didn't whistle, or even talk, this time. Harry stayed with them obediently, and resisted the urge to clench his eyes as they crossed the grounds from the tree back to the castle again, only the sky above them. They used a couple of the passages shown on the map to move through the castle, and finally emerged several corridors away from his room. He heard a soft whisper of paws on stone, and paused, turning to see Mrs. Norris's big eyes glowing yellow out of the darkness. The twins followed his gaze, and George muttered a soft expletive and extinguished his wand as Fred jerked back behind a set of mail. George followed.

"Come *on*, Harry," Fred hissed, and a hand grabbed his shoulder and jerked him back against the pair.

"*Still!*" George added, voice barely audible as he lay a hand on Harry's shoulder.

Mrs. Norris continued making her unhurried way forward, a shadow amidst shadows in the darkness of the corridor, and the twins fell

perfectly silent, hardly even breathing. Harry stood still, uncertain as to what was going on, but familiar enough with the sensation not to do anything other than stay still, as they had bid him.

Then came the familiar pause in Mrs. Norris's slow footsteps, though he couldn't actually see her fall into a slight crouch. He lifted his arms and was ready to catch her when she launched herself into them, his free hand moving to stroke her back. Almost immediately, she started voicing her rusty purr, the sound irregular and rough, but soothing.

"Is that--"

"No way!"

Neither twin said anything for a long moment, then George whispered, very quietly, "Lumos," and the tip of his wand began glowing with the faintest spark of light. Mrs. Norris glared at him through it, then turned haughtily away, looking at nothing, though she continued to vibrate gently.

The twins, who Harry could see only very dimly, were staring at her with their mouths open. Finally, Fred murmured, "Harry, are you holding Mrs. Norris?"

"Yes," he said, quietly, since they seemed to want him to whisper.

"And is she purring?"

"Yes," he repeated.

They twins exchanged a glance, then turned back to staring at Harry and Mrs. Norris. Harry waited, patiently. Finally, George looked at Fred and asked, "Why didn't we ever think of befriending Mrs. Norris?"

"Because we're idiots."

"I was hoping there was something else to it."

"Don't think so."

They both shook their heads sadly, then George reached out hesitantly and offered a hand to Mrs. Norris. She uncurled one forepaw and flicked the hand with it, opening four small bleeding cuts, and George muttered something and jerked back his hand.

"Or maybe that's why," Fred added.

George shot him a dirty look, and Fred snickered.

"C'mon," Fred said, turning and starting down the hallway again, this time not moving quite so quietly. George followed, skipped a step to catch up, and the pair were walking side-by-side again, Harry trailing behind them, one hand curling under Mrs. Norris's chin to rub her throat, the soothing rumble seeming to pass through his hand and fill his whole body, soothing. He clenched his jaw against it, and reminded himself that he didn't deserve to feel soothed. That he shouldn't be touching her at all, except that she told him to as clearly as she could without words, and disobeying was never an option. Mrs. Norris leapt from his arms and padded away as they turned into the corridor where Augustus guarded his bedroom, and the twins looked nervously after her.

"Has she gone to get Filch?" Fred asked.

"I don't know," he admitted. "I'm sorry."

The twins rolled their eyes, and sped up moving towards Augustus, who glared out at them until his eyes lit on Harry. "Harry! You're okay! I was worried when you didn't come in-- where were you?"

"We were just showing him around," George said, making a sweeping gesture with one hand. "Let him in, would ya, Auggie? Filch might be coming."

"It's way past curfew-- are you trying to get Harry in trouble?"

"You're the one keeping him out in the hall," Fred pointed out.

Auggie crossed his arms and glared at them. "You're both mean-- go away."

"Yeah, as soon as Harry's safe inside."

"Why wouldn't he be safe?" Auggie demanded.

"Because Filch might be coming! Hurry *up*."

Auggie's bottom lip jutted out, as he turned to Harry. "You shouldn't ought to be out so late."

Harry's heart skipped a beat, and he forced the apology out. "I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't know."

"The headmaster didn't tell you so?" Augustus asked, surprise overwhelming his anger, which had seemed to be covering something else.

"No."

"He didn't say anything about what time you should be in your room?"

"No."

"Oh," the painted boy said, deflating. "Then I guess it's okay." He slid aside, revealing the way into the bedroom, and Harry obediently stepped past him, then turned to look back at the twins.

"We'll come get you in the morning," Fred said cheerfully.

"Or at least one of us will," George agreed.

"Maybe both. Don't leave till we get here."

"Yes, Fred," he said softly.

And they were gone, Augustus shutting behind them with one last long look at Harry through wide eyes. Then he appeared on the inside portrait and said, "I'm sorry, okay? I didn't mean to be mean, I was just worried."

Harry swallowed, unsure how to deal with the apology, then finally said, "It's okay."

"Yeah," Augustus murmured, sounding unhappy, and returned to the outer portrait, leaving Harry in solitude.

By the time he finished his math problems, his eyes ached with fatigue and it took an effort of will to keep his hands steady enough to keep his writing neat. Finally, he put it neatly aside and He moved to a swatch of floor uncovered by carpet, dropped to his knees, and heard the first question as clearly as though it were spoken in his ear, and said,. quietly Quietly enough that Augustus wouldn't have heard him even if he was on the inside, he said "I am a freak."

He slipped into the hidden room and glanced nervously at the hat, hoping without hope, as he always did, that this time it wouldn't insist that he place it on his head.

"Put me on, Harry."

He closed his eyes for an instant, then moved across the floor, and reached out, picking up the hat and putting it on. He didn't hesitate or tremble, of course. Avoiding an order, even from such a thing as this, was defiance, and he knew better than to be defiant. Events passed behind his eyes with dizzying swiftness, then they paused, slowing, as the hat watched the events with the twins, first last night's, and then today's, starting when they had shown up to get him and continuing with George walking him to class while Fred -- and George, except it couldn't be, since George was with him -- went the other way, to his (their?) own class. At the end of every class, one of them was there, and at one point both were-- except they had the same voice, and moved even more frighteningly in unison than usual, and the switches in speech sounded just a bit more deliberate than usual. At lunch and, later, at dinner, there had been both of them with their separate voices and usual mannerisms, but whenever he saw them between classes it was ... different. They'd finally left him in his room only a few minutes earlier, hardly leaving him time to head back out and get to his meeting with the hat on time. Every time he'd been out of a class, they'd one or both of them had been with him, and every time anyone spoke to him, whichever twin was present had distracted them. It was strange and uncomfortable-- and yet also a relief not to have so many people looking at him and talking to him. When it finally

finished watching the scenes, the Hat was silent for a long moment, then murmured, "Hmm."

Harry waited, forcing the tension that kept returning to his neck and shoulders to leave again, keeping his muscles loose and relaxed as he tried not to watch what the hat was doing in his mind.

"Well. That should be ... interesting," the hat finally added. "And the map is rather extraordinary, isn't it. Intriguing. You did well going outside, Harry."

He felt the newly-familiar warmth of satisfaction at the compliment and fought it back bitterly. Although perhaps it was okay, because he was only forbidden to go outside because of the danger, not because he didn't deserve it (in fact, surely he deserved to *have* to stay out there, under that gaping void of nothingness, deserved that threat looming over him, ready to make him fall into it forever), so perhaps it was not so bad for the words to make him feel proud of himself. The confusion was equally familiar, and he hated it.

"With Professor Sprout, as well. You're making very good progress."

He felt a shiver go through him at the memory of the hour spent outside in a little grove with only the layers of branches between himself and the sky, able to see it between them in places, as she taught him about the trees. The previous step had been a lean-to, with a ceiling but no walls, and he had been so pleased when he had borne it. Yesterday, with the grove, she had seemed equally happy, though she hadn't said anything. He'd managed to focus on her words and only occasionally realized that he'd stopped hearing her and knew nothing but the emptiness beyond the treetops. Usually he caught himself and refocused, but once he was brought back by a hand on his arm, and had stilled, waiting for it to begin a rain of blows that never began. He only realized later that, although he'd expected the beating, he hadn't relaxed himself fully in preparation for it. Wasn't *actually* ready to receive it without any sound of flinch. The realization had terrified him more than the sky, and he had managed to focus through the rest of the lesson.

"You did well," the hat repeated.

Harry didn't answer.

"I shall not be able to meet with you next week, nor the following," it added, and Harry nearly sagged with the relief of the words. The hat confused him, asked him questions he couldn't answer without the guidance of his family, and he couldn't explain to it why it was wrong, couldn't say anything that sounded convincing even to himself, even though he *knew* he was right. Even having just two weeks without it would be an unearned reward for which he was grateful beyond words.

"I knew you'd be sorry," the hat said, its voice more amused than hurt or angry. "Fawkes is nearing his burning day, and shan't be able to fly until he burns and re-fledges. It shouldn't be too long. He just has to hurry up and burn," it added, glancing at the phoenix.

It had been looking more and more ragged since their first meeting, and was currently sitting very still, huddled down on the chair back it perched on, and casting a dirty look at the hat through dull eyes. It squawked once, the sound nothing like the musical notes Harry had first heard from it, and then tucked its head under a wing, ignoring them both.

"For now, though," the Hat said, "your adventures with the twins were unexpected and took rather longer to look over than I'd expected to have to spend. You'd best get back and go to bed before it gets too late."

Harry nodded acceptance, grateful to be missing the more nerve-wracking part of the session, and hurried back to his room again.

Harry glanced at the clock and then carefully closed his books, ordered his papers, and rose to his feet.

“Oy!” Fred exclaimed.

“Where are you headed off to?” George chimed in.

The twins had followed him into his room after escorting him back from dinner, and had breezily told him to do whatever it was he did, that they were going to study. The book they were huddled over didn't look like anything Harry had seen any of the other students studying, but maybe they were in a special potions class that seemed to focus on things like giving people polka dots and making things sticky and various other things that Professor Snape had never discussed in any of Harry's classes. He had started on his reading for history, trying to work out what had really happened in the First Goblin Rebellion, which was difficult since everyone said something different about what had started it. But his internal clock had just made him check the external clock, which verified that it was time for him to meet with Charlie.

“To the statue of the woman with a cat on the fourth floor,” he answered the question carefully.

Fred rolled his eyes. “How come?”

“I exercise there on weekdays.” Harry carefully took his practice Snitch off its shelf and slid open the door. He heard the two fall in behind him as he moved quietly through the halls towards where Charlie always met him.

The pair of them continued talking, but they didn't direct it at him, so he kept most of his attention on navigating the hallways and not focusing too much on anything magical.

When he got there, he glanced around and, when he didn't see Charlie right away, lifted the Practice Snitch and released it. It

hovered in place for a moment, then vanished too quickly to be seen, and he waited, head cocked slightly to one side.

“Exercise?” Fred asked softly.

Since he didn’t seem to really expect an answer, Harry ignored the comment, ears stretching to catch a flutter—and then he was running full speed down the hall towards it, eyes searching for the glint to match the flutter. He spun around the corner just in time to see a big hand close around the gold ball, and Charlie grinned at him. “Hey, Harry.”

“Hello,” he said softly, waiting.

The twins skidded around the corner, and Charlie looked startled. “Fred? George? What are you doing here?”

They looked up at him, faces running through a range of emotions, then George said, “Watching Harry. What are *you* doing here?”

“Exercising,” Charlie said with a grin. “Cardiovascular.”

“Did you tell Harry to do this?” Fred demanded.

Charlie blinked. “No, Madam Pomfrey did. Why?”

The twins exchanged a look, then shrugged in tandem. “Nothing. Harry doesn’t mind if we stay, do you, Harry?”

“No, Fred,” he said automatically, then wished he’d left off the name as four eyes rolled as one.

“Okaaaay,” Charlie said slowly. “Makes no difference to me. Ready, Harry?”

“Yes.”

He nodded, and opened his hand, the Snitch flying from it immediately.

Harry focused on the task, finding the Snitch and chasing it, getting to it first, grabbing it, releasing it again, repeating. Not letting the screaming of his muscles or the rasping of his breath slow him.

“Break time,” Fred suddenly announced.

“What?” Charlie demanded. “You can’t be tired—you guys aren’t even running!”

“We’re not,” George answered him. “Harry is.”

All three turned to look at him, and Harry looked nervously back, eyes lowered slightly, controlling his breathing and forcing his posture to be good.

“Are you tired, Harry?” Charlie asked.

“Yes,” he admitted.

“Tired enough to need a break?”

“No,” he answered, relieved to be able to give the right answer.

“Tired enough to *want* a break?” Fred interjected.

He dropped his eyes slightly further, and admitted, “Yes.”

Charlie groaned and dropped to sit, leaning back against the wall. “Well you could have *said* so,” he pointed out.

Harry sat down cross-legged, eyes locked on his hands, which he folded in his lap. “Sorry, Charlie.”

“He’s not mad at you. Just annoyed with himself for not knowing,” George stated.

“Well of course I’m not—what is *with* you two?” Charlie demanded. “When did you suddenly become Harry’s keepers?”

“We’re not!” Fred said quickly. “We’re just friends, right Harry?”

Harry considered the question, trying to figure out how the word could have any relation to him.

“Aww, c’mon, tell him we’re friends,” Fred cajoled.

“We’re friends,” Harry obediently informed Charlie.

“Fred!” George snapped at the same time, and Fred looked – something. Startled and something else. Upset?

“I didn’t mean it like that,” he said.

“Didn’t mean what...?” Charlie asked, confused.

“Nothing!” George said quickly. “So how long have you guys been having secret Quidditch practice?”

“Since school started,” Charlie said. “I found Harry up here and it ... looked like fun. So I asked if I could join in.”

“Asked?” Fred demanded. “Didn’t tell?”

“What are you *on* about?” the older boy asked, staring at the younger pair.

“Nothing,” George repeated, elbowing his twin. “You seem really good at it, Harry,” he added.

He tried to figure out an appropriate reply, but Charlie answered before he could.

“He really is. Fast kid and notices the Snitch faster’n me, nine times of ten. Gonna make Gryffindor a pretty amazing Seeker in a year or two.”

“What if he’s not Gryffindor?” George demanded.

Charlie grinned. “Well, if that happens, I guess you’d have to beat him. Which would be tough.”

Harry’s eyes flicked up for a split second in surprise at the sudden mention of beating after all the weeks without, but he didn’t allow

himself any more reaction than that, trying to understand what the possible transgression was and how it should be avoided.

“Feeling better, Harry?”

“Yes,” he agreed.

Charlie was up and bouncing slightly on the balls of his feet before the word was out of his mouth. “Let’s go then!” he said, opening his hand again.

The twins didn’t say much as they escorted Harry back to his room after exercising, just asking if he was planning to go back out that night, and grabbing their books from his room. Harry watched them go, and then settled down to finish his mathematics homework for Professor Snape.

Harry edged into the potions classroom and quietly took his seat at the back of the room, just to the side of the ingredients table, and prepared to take notes, carefully keeping all of his things well away from the ingredients and the potions bench of the pair working in front of him. Professor Snape ignored him like he always did as the lesson began with a stern warning as to the dangers of the potion they were working with today. An Audioscope potion, that let the drinker focus their hearing like a telescope focused vision, picking out and drawing near sounds that were far away and mixed in with many others.

Quill scratching against the parchment, Harry took careful notes of the lecture, and then, when Professor Snape waved for the students to begin their potions, he opened his text and began reading further, taking more notes so that he could properly write the ten inches on the dangers of the potion that was his assignment since Professor Snape still didn’t make him actually *brew* potions. The work was familiar, and he moved through the text compiling the necessary information on the various ingredients and how they could interact negatively at various stages in the brewing process. Some of them he already knew from previous essays, but he made sure to look them up anyway, since his memory was far from reliable.

The fumes were starting to roll through the room when he finished gathering information and started actually writing his essay. Two of

the cauldrons were bubbling much harder than the rest—one because it was further along, the other because, judging from its vibrant blue shade and frothing boil, the bats' tongues had been added before the potion was cool enough after adding the Deathspore. He didn't need to check his notes to know that if anyone touched the fluid now it would cause boils to form and burst everywhere it had touched, which would be very painful and difficult to cure. He checked anyway before carefully listing it as one of the dangers in brewing the potion.

Professor Snape was watching the same potion with a disgusted sneer, he noticed, glancing up from his work and around the room when his eyes started to water as more of the potions started pouring off fumes. The professor was watching everyone, of course, but his eyes kept going back to that one cauldron, which was boiling even more frantically as the two students working over it carefully poured in crushed arrowroot, one continuing to stir while the other started to measure out the next ingredient.

Harry quickly returned his eyes to his own work, berating himself for his distraction as he immersed himself in explaining the dangers of the brewing. His eyes flashed up, startled, at the explosion—though it was almost immediately cut off by Professor Snape's vanishing charm, and drowned out by the howls of pain of the two students and the shouts of the professor.

"Imbeciles!" he snarled. "Did you not even *notice* that all was not well when your potion turned blue instead of green? You thought, perhaps, that if you just *pushed through*, it would all be okay? And when it foamed rather than simply boiling, you decided that the instructions were at fault, rather than your brewing?" They offered no response beyond groans of pain, and he shot a glance around the room then pointed at Ian Mahoney, the Hufflepuff student directly in front of Harry and said, "Mr. Mahoney. See them to Madam Pomfrey. The rest of you—continue your work."

"Yessir," Ian said quickly, setting aside the spoon he was stirring with as his partner gathered more ingredients and moving over to the pair and helping them to their feet and towards the door.

The door had barely closed behind them when the spoon Mr. Mahoney had been using slipped off the edge of the cauldron, into a pile of neatly arranged and chopped potions ingredients. Harry dropped his eyes back to his essay as, with a sound like the popping corn he made for Dudley sometimes, some of the ingredients began to explode off the pile and into the air. Students dove under their benches, Professor Snape started to wave his wand—and Harry felt a sharp, hot pain on the right side of his face—and then his right ear was ringing—and then it was more than ringing, it was *screaming*, his skull vibrating with the noise of it and, despite himself, he clapped his hand to his ear and turned away from the horrible noise, feeling several more hits to his face and chest as he turned the ringing ear away from the cacophony, and was hit on the other side with another one, and *both* sides were incredibly, impossibly loud, and every bone in his body was vibrating, his muscles tensing despite himself, and his mouth fell open in a scream he couldn't hear—and it just got louder. And louder. And louder.

He didn't know how much time passed with him aware only of the unbearable noise and the pain it brought with it, worse than the worst of Uncle Vernon's beatings, worse than anything he'd even imagined. He couldn't even get used to it, because it grew and shrank and *changed*, sometimes high and piercing, other times so low it felt like his eyes were going to explode, sometimes both at once. Sometimes he almost heard voices in it, but he couldn't make them out, couldn't understand what was being said or by whom. For once, he couldn't even bring himself to *care* who was speaking or why. He thought he felt hands on him, but he couldn't uncurl from the protective ball he was curled in, arms wrapped around his head, trying helplessly to block out the noise, though it didn't help at all. He couldn't uncurl enough to look up at them—and then the noise got even *louder*—and then there was nothing.

Harry woke to a silence except for a strange, crackling hum, and a bone-deep ache. He stirred uncomfortably, and then froze. He was curled up on the floor. In the dark. Cautiously, he opened his eyes. It was completely and totally dark. Quickly, not letting himself linger over it, he pulled his arms away from his head, ignoring the way his arms ached at the movement, and *listened*.

There was nothing but that hum, all around and unfamiliar, but not loud. There were no loose panes of glass rattling in their fittings, no whispers of paintings in the hall and no rustle of house elves. And he wasn't in his bed. He was on the floor, curled in a tight ball, and the space felt small and familiar and—he reached out, hardly daring to believe it, and gasped in relief as he touched the familiar plaster wall of the cupboard under the stairs. He was home.

He carefully, silently, opened the door. It was dark outside, but not so dark that he couldn't easily make out the familiar living room. There was, he realized with a satisfaction as deep as the ache still curling in his bones, a great deal to do. Without hesitation, he started picking up dirty dishes and mismatched socks and carefully neatening and straightening. According to the glowing green clock on the microwave when he ferried the first load of glasses into the kitchen (adding to a tower of filthy dishes on the counter), it was just before three in the morning.

Squinting slightly in the dark, he finished cleaning the living room and then got to work on the kitchen. He hadn't made much of a dent before the squawk of Uncle Vernon's alarm clock drew his attention to the upstairs, and he spared a half-nervous, half-hopeful look towards the stairs before quickly pulling a newly-cleaned frying pan out of the dish rack and starting half a rasher of bacon frying, then reaching to clean another skillet so he could add eggs as well. He kept washing as he fried, not letting his attention get caught up in the thumps and creaks above as the family started moving around and finally came downstairs.

Uncle Vernon came first, lumbering down the stairs and into the kitchen, and glared at the set table, then sent a disappointed look at Harry. "You forgot my newspaper," he stated, voice gentle.

"I'm sorry, sir," Harry apologized, not letting himself flinch at the stupid mistake. "I'll get it—"

"That's okay, I got it," Dudley called from the other room, then came in and tossed the paper to his father and offered Harry an uncertain smile. "Hi."

Harry had to stop himself from cringing back from the unexpected greeting. “Hello, Dudley,” he answered nervously. His cousin looked ... odd. He’d lost weight. He wasn’t *thin*, but he looked sort of big and *hard* rather than big and soft. And his face was ... different.

“You made breakfast—cool! Is there any grapefruit in there? Coach has me eating more fruit.”

“Sorry, Dudley,” he said quickly, and opened the icebox—and froze, realizing that he had no idea what grapefruit looked like.

The blow took him totally by surprise, directly between his shoulder blades, and he fell forward, slamming his forehead against the icebox door which he still held open, and a yelp escaping him despite himself. He turned quickly, eyes dropping to the floor. “Thank you, Uncle Vernon. I’m sorry.”

“Dudley wants grapefruit,” Vernon growled.

“I’m sorry, sir, I don’t—I don’t know what it *is*.”

His breath caught as the heavy first caught him a second time, though this time he managed to keep quiet and passively accept the punishment.

“Dad! Dad, calm down! It’s okay!” Dudley’s voice sounded a little higher than it had a minute ago, and almost scared, and Harry didn’t know what it meant, knew he ought to, but just had absolutely no *idea* what he was supposed to do, so he just waited, felt himself start to tremble in reaction to the uncertainty, and forced himself to relax and just *wait*.

“Harry has clearly lost all sense of discipline while he was away—”
“Vernon started, and Harry let his eyes slip shut in shame.

“What, because he doesn’t know what grapefruit is? That’s crazy! And Coach says that hitting people for not knowing things doesn’t help them learn, it just makes them angry and scared.”

“Are you angry with me, Harry?” Uncle Vernon asked, tone gentle.

"No, sir!" he gasped, horrified at the idea.

"Harry's not angry, Dudley. Your coach doesn't know everything."

"But *Coach* says—"

"That is *enough*," Uncle Vernon said sharply, and Harry had to stop himself from cringing at the tone—all the more because it was directed at *Dudley*, and everything was supposed to be *normal* here.

Dudley scowled at his father and grabbed what looked like a giant yellowish orange from the bottom shelf of the icebox, then went back to his seat and started peeling it.

"Oh, Harry, have you caused trouble *already*?" Aunt Petunia asked from the doorway, looking from her scowling son to her angry husband to Harry.

"I'm sorry, Aunt Petunia," he said.

"He didn't *do* anything," Dudley pointed out, pulling off a section of fruit and tearing half of it off, chewing.

"Don't you want some sugar, Duddykins?" Aunt Petunia asked, eyeing the fruit with unveiled disapproval.

"No, thanks," he muttered. "I'm good."

"Well, have some bacon, too, darling."

"No, thanks."

"You're wasting away, Dudley, and—"

"Mum, I'm *fine*," he snapped. "If you wanna feed someone up, how about Harry? He's the one who *needs* some food."

Cold green eyes turned to Harry. "Are you hungry, Harry?" she asked, voice soft.

"Yes, Aunt Petunia," he admitted, ashamed.

“*What* have we said about hunger, Harry?”

“That if you’re bad, you don’t deserve to eat,” he said softly. “And to get hungry anyway is defiance. I apologize for my defiance, Aunt Petunia. And—And it’s worse,” he said, not letting his voice vanish into a whisper, forcing himself to speak clearly.

“*Coach* says a balanced diet—“

“*Thank* you, Dudley, I believe we know by now *everything* that your coach says,” Uncle Vernon said. “Worse than defiance, Harry?”

“Yes, Uncle Vernon,” he said.

“Confess, then,” he said sadly.

“I—I have discovered that I was using magic, Uncle Vernon. So that I wouldn’t eat. I can’t—I can’t *stop* it, except by making sure that I eat.”

“You discovered this,” Uncle Vernon repeated flatly.

“Yes, Uncle Vernon.”

“And for how long were you feeding your defiance in this way?”

“I don’t know, Uncle Vernon. I’m sorry.”

“Your best estimate?”

“I—I might have always done it,” he admitted. “I’ve stopped,” he added. “Only—if I don’t eat, it comes back. And I can’t *stop* it.”

His aunt and uncle exchanged a disappointed look, and he waited, not letting himself turn away or pull back.

“Woah, you can *do* that?” Dudley demanded. “How does that work?”

“Dudley!” Aunt Petunia snapped in a tone Harry had never heard her use before. “You’re going to be late for school.”

Dudley’s eyes snapped down to the large black watch on his wrist and then he jerked to his feet and rumbled up the stairs. Upstairs, a

door opened and then slammed, and then he stampeded back down. "Bye, Mum—Dad. Bye, Harry—thanks for breakfast," he shouted—and then the front door slammed, and Harry felt an undeserved sense of relief that he was gone. He wasn't *acting* right.

"If you must eat, then eat," Uncle Vernon stated, voice heavy with disappointment. "All those years, Harry. All those *lies* when you pretended to be growing less defiant."

"I'm sorry, Uncle Vernon. I can—I can wait," he whispered, stumbling over the words.

"Can you? Without bringing that *freakishness* into our home?"

"I—no," he said, voice small.

Vernon's mouth tightened, lips growing white. "Are you *frightened*, Harry? Speak up."

"Yes, Uncle Vernon," he admitted, forcing himself to speak up clearly.

"Why?"

"Because I am defiant," he stated. "I know that I deserve punishment for my behavior, but I fear it anyway."

"More defiance," Aunt Petunia hissed.

"Your ... headmaster spoke quite highly of you when he brought you back," Uncle Vernon said, voice noncommittal. "He seemed to find you very ... *bright*," he said, taking a moment to choose his word. "Very bright and eager to please."

"I'm sorry, Uncle Vernon," he said.

"I thought you understood that you were to convince them you were dull?"

"I—Yes, Uncle Vernon."

"So you failed at that, too, did you?"

"Yes, Uncle Vernon. I'm sorry," he said, eyes on the floor. His stomach rumbled, and he dropped his eyes even further at the reminder of his defiance.

"Eat," Uncle Vernon snapped.

"Yes, Uncle Vernon," he said softly, ashamed. He stepped forward, loaded a plate, feeling his family's eyes on him as he scooped up eggs and bacon, and then perched on the edge of a chair, and took a bite. Then froze, and slowly dropped off the edge of the chair and onto the floor, eyes down. "I'm sorry!" he whispered. "I—I didn't mean to."

"Clearly," Aunt Petunia stated, voice so disappointed he felt tears welling in his eyes, "you put up absolutely no defenses against their brainwashing. Eat your breakfast, Harry. We will consider punishment later."

"After hearing what else there is that you need punishment *for*," Uncle Vernon added. "Am I correct in assuming that the list is not yet complete?"

"Yes, Uncle Vernon," he admitted. "I'm sorry."

"If you were good," he said softly, "you wouldn't *have* to be sorry, Harry. You should have tried harder."

"I know, sir. But it was very ... confusing."

"If you were good," Aunt Petunia stated, "it would *not* be confusing."

"I know, Aunt Petunia," he admitted. "I'm sorry."

"Eat, if eat you must," Uncle Vernon ordered him, voice heavy with disappointment. "We will talk of your sins and your defiance as well as your punishments when I return from work."

"Yes, sir," he agreed, hand snaking up to grab his plate and bring it down to the floor, where he ate it quickly, feeling their eyes on him with every bite.

Harry stood still, facing the door to his cupboard, not letting himself twist away from the leather belt striking his shoulders and back again and again. He swayed slightly towards the door and steadied himself, standing up straight as the belt whistled through the air again. The telling of all his transgressions at school had taken hours, and his aunt and uncle were just as disappointed as he'd known they would be. Disappointed and frustrated.

The blows stopped for a moment, his uncle's harsh, uneven breathing pausing, and then the man said, "The worst of it was bringing them into our *home*, Harry."

"I'm sorry, Uncle Vernon," he whispered. "I didn't mean to."

"You were *clumsy*."

"Yes, Uncle Vernon." They'd told him what had happened. Professor Dumbledore had told *them* when he'd been dropped off. Apparently the ingredients that had hit him had somehow made him *hear* magic, and, at the school, surrounded by so much of it, it was deafening and he'd passed out with the pain of it. Professor Snape was to make a potion to fix it, but it needed herbs harvested at a particular moon phase, and it would be two weeks before he could do it. One-and-a-half, now, since he'd spent three days at home, cooking, cleaning, and doing laundry during the day, reciting lists of everything he could think of that he'd done wrong or thought *might* have been wrong, and accepting his punishments, in the evenings. "I'm sorry, sir."

"You should have gotten out of the way."

He closed his eyes and took a breath, wondering how he could have been so stupid as to not realize that getting out of the way of the potions ingredients would be different from getting out of the way of a *punishment*. That rather than a punishment, it was a threat to his family. "Yes, sir."

"They came into our *home*, Harry," Uncle Vernon said, and the belt whipped out again, this time buckle first, and he heard a soft rip as it scored the thin fabric of his old T-shirt and felt a small trickle of blood roll down his shoulder.

"I'm sorry, sir," he repeated. "I should have avoided it."

"You're weak," Uncle Vernon stated, the buckle slamming down again, then again as he built back into a rhythm. "You chose poorly time and again, and let them manipulate and coddle you into forgetting your lessons and your beliefs."

"Yes, sir. I'm sorry."

"And the *hat*," Uncle Vernon sneered. "How could you *imagine* that listening to a *hat* was acceptable behavior, Harry?"

"I don't know, Uncle Vernon," he said miserably. "It said—"

"It *should not* say! Hats *do not* talk," Uncle Vernon snarled, punctuating each word with another blow. "Which should make it clear that anything it *did* say should be *ignored*!"

"Yes, Uncle Vernon, but—"

The belt suddenly fell still, as Uncle Vernon repeated, voice suddenly soft and sad, "But'? I can see that nothing we've done for you has ever made any impression at all. Go to your cupboard, Harry. There's no use talking to you."

Fighting back tears, Harry opened the door, stepped inside, and closed it behind him, dropping down to sit and leaning forward, cradling his head in his arms as he accepted the absolute misery of having failed so completely. And he *had* known that he shouldn't listen to the hat, shouldn't obey it. But—he shuddered at even *thinking* the word a second time, at arguing with his uncle even in his own mind, since he *knew* he was wrong and his uncle was right—but the hat had said it would tell the wizards. And then they would come here, which he had *thought* would be far worse than his obedience. But he should *know* better than to trust his thoughts, he knew he didn't understand quickly, not compared to *good* people.

He pulled himself to his knees and sat up straight, head bowed, and quietly began his catechism, *willing* himself to be good. He reached the end and started it again. *What are you?* Again. Again. Over and

over, letting the words fill him and overflow, needing to purge the evil in him, knowing it wasn't enough, but it was all he could do.

The front door opened and then shut loudly, and he heard the muffled thuds of Dudley trudging up the steps and going to his room without calling out a greeting or speaking to anyone. He curled a little tighter in his ball and tried not to think about how disturbing his cousin's behavior was. He wasn't the *same*. Sometimes Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon even talked to him as though he weren't entirely *good*, and if *Dudley* couldn't be good, what hope could *Harry* ever have?

"Fix dinner," Aunt Petunia ordered abruptly, and something deep within him unclenched slightly at the words, grateful that they weren't entirely giving up on him yet, that they weren't going to leave him in the cupboard forever.

He slipped out with a soft acknowledgement of the order, and made his way to the kitchen, quickly getting to work preparing a shepherd's pie.

"Clarence's mum asked me to dinner," Dudley called from upstairs. "Can I?"

"No," Vernon said.

"Daaa-aaaad," Dudley whined, trailing down the stairs in a series of loud thumps. "How come? I haven't seen Clarence all *week*, except at school, and—"

"And you wouldn't see him then, if I had my druthers," Uncle Vernon interjected. "The boy's mad."

"What happened to that nice boy, Piers, you used to be such good friends with?" Aunt Petunia demanded.

"He's a bit of a git," Dudley called over his shoulder as he lounged into the kitchen and dropped into a chair, watching as Harry quickly peeled potatoes.

Harry kept his eyes on his task, trying not to give Dudley any reason to get angry with him—and knowing that this new Dudley got upset

over even more incomprehensible things than he used to—and wouldn't punish him properly even when he was.

"Clarence is my best friend," Dudley announced suddenly.

Since there wasn't a question, Harry didn't respond, though he did send a startled glance to his cousin, seeing the bigger boy's eyes locked on him, a funny expression on his face that Harry didn't know the meaning of.

"He moved in across the way a few months back, and at first we kinda hated each other, but then—" He stopped abruptly, falling silent, and Harry didn't speak, just listened attentively for some continuation, some idea what was wanted of him as he cut potatoes into quarters and put them into a pot. "And there's coach," Dudley said abruptly, and Harry didn't flinch at his failure to follow the conversation, just waited. "I started judo lessons not long after you left. The school said I had to—they wanted me to learn, like, discipline, which didn't sound like fun, but learning to beat people up did. Only—I like the discipline better," he said.

Harry dared another glance at his cousin, who was staring down at his hands, now, which were fidgeting uncertainly on the table. Harry added water and salt to the potatoes and put them on the heat.

"I'm sorry I've been such a prat," Dudley said abruptly.

Harry almost dropped the heavy pot, but he managed to steady it and set it down on the burner before anything horrible happened. He shot another anxious, sideways glance at Dudley, but got no hint of what he was supposed to say or do, so he turned on the heat under the potatoes and waited.

"Coach says real men apologize when they're prats. And I was. So I'm sorry. Okay?"

And that, he recognized, was a question. Although one he had *no* idea how to answer correctly. "You don't—" He paused nervously, tried again. "You don't have to apologize to me, Dudley. I'm sorry for whatever I did that made you think you did."

Dudley frowned, lower lip jutting out in a way that Harry was all too familiar with, and Harry waited, half fearful and half hopeful, for the first blow to land.

It didn't. Instead, Dudley hit the table, something strange and horrible in his face. "I don't know what to do," he whispered.

Harry blinked, startled at both the words and the tone. Dudley sounded like him. Lost and confused and scared. And it scared him more than anything ever had. More than the hat, and more than Uncle Vernon's announcement the first day after he returned that he would have special punishments every night until he learned better, and even more than how much he loved flying. Because Dudley was good. He wasn't *supposed* to be confused. "You're *good*," he said, shocked into speech even though no question had been asked. "You'll do the right thing." It seemed like the most obvious thing in the world. Of *course* Dudley would do what was right—that was who he was.

Dudley's face screwed up like he was going to cry, and he didn't look at Harry, just down at his hands, which were clenched together, knuckles a pale, sickly yellow against the pink of the rest of his hands. "I can't—I'm not—I'm *sorry*," he said, and then he left, almost running out of the room and up the stairs.

Aunt Petunia called after him, tone worried, but subsided at his shout that he was *fine*. Uncle Vernon rose from the telly program he was watching and made his way into the kitchen, staring ominously at Harry.

Not letting himself cringe away from the angry stare, Harry straightened his shoulders, lowered his eyes, and waited to be told what he'd done wrong.

"So the magic school taught you that you were better than ordinary folks, did it?" Uncle Vernon asked.

"No, Uncle Vernon," he said, feeling panic build in his stomach. "It didn't! I'm not!"

"You upset my son. Are you better than Dudley, Harry?"

“No, sir!”

“Then why did you choose to upset him?”

“I’m sorry, Uncle Vernon. I didn’t mean to. I didn’t know—“

“You *should* have known!” Uncle Vernon roared.

“I—Yes, sir, I’m *sorry*, sir,” he whispered.

“I don’t want you to be sorry—I want you to be *good*,” Uncle Vernon said, tone suddenly dropping, soft and sad. “But I begin to see that you never will be.”

Harry’s eyes prickled with tears, and he bit the inside of his lip.

“Finish dinner. No punishment that we mete out even makes a *dent* in your defiance, your willfulness. I don’t know why we continue to try.”

“I’m *sorry*, Uncle Vernon. I don’t mean to,” he whispered helplessly.

“Then why do you *do* it, Harry?” he asked tiredly. “Of course you mean to. But if there is no saving you, perhaps we should stop trying. You don’t even *want* to be good.”

“I *do*,” he whispered. “Please, Uncle Vernon, *please* don’t give up on me. I’ll do anything. *Please*.”

He heaved a sigh and shook his head. “We’ll see. I’m too tired to think on it now. Finish dinner, Harry.”

Barely able to see through the tears in his eyes, he obeyed. Nobody spoke to him during dinner, though Dudley shot him several glances and seemed on the verge of speaking more than once. He waited hopefully for someone to make some request so he could show that he was willing to obey, that there was still hope. But nobody did. Dudley even got up himself and got more milk rather than asking for it. After dinner, Harry quickly, silently washed the dishes, and then went into his cupboard and again, feverishly, repeated his catechism over and over through the night, unable to sleep with the misery of his uncle’s words repeating in his ears. He hated himself for being almost

relieved that his uncle didn't come that night with the promised special punishment. Hated himself for what that showed about him. Maybe his uncle was right and he was hopeless.

The next day, the cupboard was locked and he stayed inside silently, wondering if it would ever unlock again. If they would ever decide he was worth one more chance. He heard Dudley and Uncle Vernon fighting at one point, but couldn't make out the words. He didn't *want* to make out the words. It terrified him that they would be in discord, that even Dudley could fall from grace. Squeezing his eyes shut, he repeated his catechism, drowning out the sound of their argument.

The following morning, the cupboard was unlocked and he cautiously made his way out, slinking through the living room and into the kitchen. He was hungry. He'd been working for the last twelve hours to convince his magic that he wasn't, that it didn't need to activate, but he *was*. He again reminded his magic that he was *fine*, that he didn't need it, and washed the dishes from the day before, and fixed breakfast. He *wouldn't* be defiant *or* use magic. He *wouldn't*.

Dudley didn't come into the kitchen, just went straight out the door. To school. Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon ate without acknowledging him in any way, and then headed for the door. Just before they reached it, Uncle Vernon turned back and finally, finally looked at him. "The cellar floor needs to be painted. Take care of it."

"Yes, sir," he said eagerly, relieved to have been given *something* he could do to try to *fix* things.

Aunt Petunia offered him just a hint of a sad smile, and then the two were gone, and he hurried to the basement. The room was dimly lit and, besides the washer and dryer it housed, was filled with old furniture, broken appliances, and just about everything else he could imagine. Petrol for the lawnmower, summer clothes, neatly boxed and labeled, odd tools and parts. When he'd gone to school, it was all neatly organized and spotlessly clean, but he was slow and useless and hadn't yet taken the time to put everything to rights since his return.

His ears buzzed with magic and he forced his attention to his stomach, forcefully convincing it that he was *fine*, that he wasn't

hungry, and the sound faded again. There were cans of paint and a couple of brushes on top of the metal cabinet beside the stairs, but he couldn't start with those. He had to clean before he started on painting.

It was easy to lose himself in his work, the familiar dusting and scrubbing as natural as breathing, and he worked fast and hard, needing to make his family proud, to give them hope for him again. He dragged around the furniture to scrub under and behind it, moved shelves and boxes, got everywhere he could. He tried to move the shelves next to the stairs, the huge metal ones, but even when they were completely unloaded he couldn't budge them an inch. Finally, he gave up and moved on, scrubbing the main portion of the stairs, and then going upstairs to quickly do the dishes and straighten the living room and make the beds while the floor dried.

When he went back down, the last dark stain of drying water had vanished, and he looked around, biting his lip lightly as he tried to determine the best way to do this. Horrified to realize that he couldn't come up with a way to do it in one day. He'd have to move all the furniture to one side, paint the other side, and then move everything to *that* side to paint the first side. Only he couldn't move it back till the paint was dry. And he couldn't take it upstairs. His family wouldn't like that, and even if it was the right thing to do, he *couldn't* lift the things up the stairs, no matter how hard he tried.

Reluctantly, he made up his mind to a plan, and moved everything from the far side of the basement to the other side, closer to the stairs. Since the shelves he couldn't move were on that side anyway, it made more sense to leave it. Plus, the small, high-set windows were on the other side, so maybe it would dry faster. Finally, anxiously aware of how much time had already passed, how soon they would be coming home, he started to paint.

He didn't let himself pause when he heard the door open upstairs, barely let his eyes slip around to measure his progress, *knowing* that it wasn't enough, wasn't anywhere near enough. He heard them enter the kitchen. Heard the top step creak, then the next. Then they stopped.

“*What* is the meaning of this?” Uncle Vernon demanded. “I said to *paint the floor*, not to block the stairs!”

“I’m sorry, sir,” he said, stopping immediately and turning, eyes flickering to the piles he’d created, and the path from the base of the stairs through it. “I had to move everything to—”

Uncle Vernon moved down the rest of the stairs more quickly, advancing on him with his eyes narrowed and his lips tight, hands clenching and releasing at his sides, head turning in jerky motions to take in the state of the basement. “And *this* is all you’ve achieved?” he demanded.

“Yes, sir,” Harry admitted. “I’m sorry.”

“You left the door open,” Aunt Petunia added, voice tired and impatient. “The kitchen smells of paint fumes.”

“I’m sorry, Aunt Petunia.”

“Stand up.”

Harry rose quickly to his feet, facing his uncle, and one meaty fist lashed out, catching him in the solar plexus. He stumbled back, gasping for breath, fell, and looked down in horror as he slowly lifted his hands out of the wet paint and stared at the mess he’d made. He scrabbled back to his feet and forward, resuming his position, a helpless apology on his lips.

Uncle Vernon was perfectly silent for a long moment, then he heaved a long, ominous sigh. “You are dripping paint, Harry.”

“I’m sorry, sir,” he whispered, looking helplessly down at the spatters on the floor around him, the footprints, the smears—

“Take hold of the pole, Harry, if you are too useless even to stand on your own.”

Tears of shame pricking his eyes, he moved over to the metal support pole in the middle of the cellar and gripped it with both hands. The blows came fast and hard, first from the heavy fists, then from

other things, harder and heavier and longer. He didn't try to see what was used, just focused on not screaming. He wasn't supposed to scream. It was bad to scream...

There was a burst of iron in his mouth as he bit through his lip, but it wasn't important, nothing was important except his family's disappointment and his own evil and the desperate need to not make it worse by *screaming* as something heavy and jagged fell on his shoulders and he heard his shirt rip and felt it fall mostly off, the air cold against his back. The next blow caught in skin instead of shirt, and he couldn't help the moan that escaped him, laying his head forward against the pole and focusing on accepting the punishment, knowing it was deserved, not fighting it or objecting to it by screaming or struggling or *moving*.

"What are you?" his aunt demanded, each word spaced so that it was punctuated by another blow from his uncle.

"I am a freak," he said, forcing the words out through the pain.

"What was your father?"

The familiar words were easy to speak, the only thing he could possibly have said without the scream escaping, without the words vanishing into wordless cries of pain. He was grateful to her for giving him the escape, the way to not scream. "James Potter. Bully. Alcoholic. Wizard. Freak."

"What did he think of you?"

"I—" he broke off as a fist caught him in the kidney and his knees threatened to collapse beneath him, but he straightened them and forced himself on. "I was a disappointment and an inconvenience."

"Who was your mother?"

He answered by rote, but not without thought, feeling the words, *knowing* them. "Lily Potter. Spoiled brat. Whore. Witch. Freak."

"What did she—"

“Stop it! *Stop it*, you’re *hurting* him, you’re gonna *kill* him!”

He opened his eyes, startled, and twisted his head to see Dudley hurtling down the stairs, expression terrified and horrified, pushing past his mother and grabbing his father’s hand, a thick, broken dowel clutched in it, the last six inches of it red.

Uncle Vernon jerked away and brought the dowel down again, not on Harry’s back but across Dudley’s chest, knocking him back. “Stay *out* of this, Dudley! He must *learn*!”

Dudley stared up through wide, shocked eyes, which moved from Uncle Vernon to his mother to Harry and back to Uncle Vernon.

Aunt Petunia moved a step towards him, a flickering sideways glance going to Uncle Vernon, whose eyes never moved from Dudley’s.

“You’re insane,” Dudley whispered.

Uncle Vernon took a step towards him, and the boy rose stumbled back, away, hitting crates behind him, and then sliding along them until he found the gap to the stairs. And then he was running.

“Dudley—“ Aunt Petunia started, voice high and sharp.

“I didn’t mean—but he’ll be fine.” Uncle Vernon turned back to Harry, eyes tiny and furious. “What have you done to my *son*?” he demanded, grabbing the half empty gallon of paint Harry had been using and throwing it at the stairs for emphasis. “Did you do your magic on him, poison him?”

“No, sir!”

The dowel slammed down, and snapped with a dull crack. He hit him a couple more times with the short end then cast it aside, looking for some other tool.

Harry clenched his eyes, lay his forehead on the pole, and tried desperately not to scream as the blows rained faster and harder and they howled at him as his knees gave way and he collapsed onto the floor, tears streaming down his cheeks. He could hear a buzz of

magic, knew he was doing something, but didn't know *what* and couldn't stop it. He tried to obey the shouts for him to stand up, to accept his punishment, but his legs wouldn't hold him, and his uncle started to kick him, in the stomach, in the sides, in the back, and he found himself curling into a ball, trying to protect himself from the heavy boots, and he had no *right*—

And then the screams were wilder and less angry and more fearful and the air was hot instead of cold and he forced his eyes open to see the stream of paint on the stairs blazing with fire, his aunt and uncle staring at it in horror. Aunt Petunia threw a bucket of something at it, but instead of fizzling out, it roared larger, and she shrieked and backed away, and it seemed almost to follow, touching the first box beside the stairs and igniting it.

Thick black smoke swirled up from the fire, and Harry took a weak breath and coughed—and his ears hummed with magic and when he coughed blue light came out of his mouth, and the air didn't smell like smoke any more. He struggled to his feet, trying to get to Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, who had backed away and were coughing themselves, and they looked at him, terrified and horrified, and Uncle Vernon shouted, "*Freak!*" and put a hand in the middle of his chest and shoved with all his strength.

Harry slammed back into the heavy cabinet beside the stairs and then fell, hearing it creak and groan above him—and then it was on top of him, pinning him, and he couldn't move, couldn't—

The gallons of paint on top of the cabinet smashed open as they fell, and he coughed and gasped as he caught a faceful of it, unable even to raise his hand to clear it from his mouth. But worse—the fire caught it and burned madly. He knew he was going to burn as it followed the trail, caught in his hair—and it didn't hurt, and he could see the blue glow around him growing brighter and stronger, and the buzz got louder, and he whimpered with the knowledge that he was doing *magic*.

His eyes widened as he saw the fire follow the spilled paint the *other* way as well—and catch the floor, and burn in a fiery sheet across,

towards where Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon huddled against the wall.

Uncle Vernon's eyes caught his, mad with terror, and he shrieked, "*Help* us, damn you, Harry, *help* us!"

And Harry tried to move, but the shelves were too heavy the magic glow was cool around him despite the raging fire and he tried to do *something, anything*, but he could only watch as the hem of Aunt Petunia's dress caught, and he screamed with her as she shrieked in pain and fear, swatting ineffectually at the flaming fabric.

"Use your damned *magic*, boy, and *save* us!" Uncle Vernon screamed.

And he gasped, and *tried*, tried to make the blue light leave him and go to *them, they* were the ones who needed it, not him, it didn't *matter* what happened to him, but it ignored him, and he shouted out the quenching spell the hat had made him learn, but he didn't have even a practice wand, and the flames leapt higher and his aunt and uncle screamed and screamed as the smoke blocked his view and then—then the screaming stopped and there was only the shriek of magic and the roar of the fire and his own ragged sobs .

He turned his attention inwards, just like the hat had taught him, searched out the magic just like if it was keeping him from being hungry. He determinedly started trying to unravel it, telling it he didn't *need* it, just like he had before with the food magic. It was *evil*, dark, unnatural. It had let his aunt and uncle *die*, and he didn't *want* it.

He started coughing again through his sobs, and felt the cool start to give way to heat.